Exploring the Hypervisibility Paradox: Older Lesbians in Contemporary Mainstream Cinema (1995-2009)

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A thesis submitted to
The University of Gloucestershire
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Media, Arts and Technology

July 2011

Abstract

This thesis explores the intersection of age, gender and sexuality in representations of older lesbian characters in contemporary narrative film. Taking the 1990s as a benchmark of lesbian visibility, I explore the turn of the century representability by focusing on British and American film (1995 to 2009). I identify a hypervisibility paradox during this period of cinematic production where the presence of a multitude of young lesbian and bisexual characters can be seen to be in complete contrast with the invisibility of the older lesbian. Mainstream postfeminist culture censors the ageing female body, except in its 'successfully aged', youthful, heterosexualised form. Older lesbian characters are excluded from this frame of visibility and, instead, are represented through paradigms associated with the concept of 'ageing as decline.'

There is little in existing age studies or lesbian film studies to articulate an understanding of the intersection of age, gender and sexuality in cinematic representation. I adopt an interdisciplinary cultural studies approach to make my contribution in what is an under-researched area and present a multifaceted approach to a complex cultural image.

I investigate the continuity of the concept of the lesbian as ghostly (Castle, 1993) through narratives of illness, death and mourning. I argue that the narrative of 'ageing as decline' stands in for the process of 'killing off' lesbian characters (identified in 1960s and 1970s cinema). The intersection of the identity *old* with *lesbian* thus results in a double ghosting and 'disappearance' of the older lesbian character. Regarding *Notes on a Scandal* (Eyre, 2006), I pursue two particular readings. One emphasises the return of the lesbian as monstrous based on the construction of ageing and lesbian desire as abject (Kristeva, 1982). A second reading moves beyond the monstrous lesbian as a 'negative' stereotype and identifies the protagonist as a queer character who subverts heteronormativity. Finally, I turn to oppositional reading practices in order to optimise the possibilities of identifications across mainstream film texts. Based on Judi Dench's various

transgressive film roles, her role as M in the Bond franchise in particular, I explore this actress' subversive potential to represent the older lesbian.

I conclude that despite mainstream cinema's hypervisibility paradox, characters who transgress age, gender and sexuality norms can provide opportunities for lesbian identification.

Acknowledgements

Dedication:

To my mother, who did not grow old

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Chapter One

Introduction

By the mid-2000s, the promise of inclusion into mainstream representation was 'in the air' as more diverse lesbian characters appeared in the films playing in the cinemas of Lisbon. *The Hours* (Daldry) in 2002, *My Summer of Love* (Pawlikowski) in 2004 and the romantic comedy *Imagine Me & You* in 2005 (Parker) are some key examples. The latter presented a 'girl meets girl' story with a happy-ending giving lesbian viewers the mainstream pleasures of the comforting, familiar format of the British comedy.

At the same time a multitude of lesbian characters populated Portuguese television on a weekly basis as I discovered *The L Word* (2004-2009)[1] in what became a five-year long addiction. The following year, with *The L Word* in its third season and while I was still trying to figure out whether Shane's[2] haircut would work with my hair, a film suddenly broke the spell – *Notes on a Scandal* (2006).[3] In stark contrast to the shiny, glamorous LA lesbians depicted in *The L Word* each week, Judi Dench's Barbara Covett came as a shock. Barbara's character resuscitated the spectre of the predatory lesbian that, to me, seemed long lost in the archives of lesbian celluloid images. I had heard rumours of their existence but (being born in 1979 and coming out in 21st century Portugal) I had managed to avoid such 'negative' images until then. As we left the cinema that night, my friend Ana confirmed our shared feeling of apprehension, 'Oh no! When I get old am I going to end up like that?' I was hit in the face by what I identify in this thesis as the *hypervisibility paradox* for ageing lesbians.

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[1] *A Letra 'L'* first aired on cable subscription channel *Fox Life* and later on public television, RTP2.
[2] The character Shane McCutcheon (played by Katherine Moening).
[3] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.

This is the power of the screen;[4] and I would suggest that, for many lesbians, while the glamorised, stylish *L Word* characters are easily recognised as fictional (with their wealthy existence a world apart from our everyday lives), the bleak portrayal of a lonely older character, whose desire is pathologised, is much more immediately assumed to be a reality – 'our future'. The darkest tales of lonely old age combine with the sense that despite the recent freedoms gained for younger generations, same-sex desire will 'then' become inappropriate. It is the virtual absence of alternative images of older lesbians, their experiences and relationships that makes the overbearing presence of Barbara's character problematic. Not only for younger lesbians who grew up in the era of 'new' visibility, but also for older lesbian women whose lives and present day experiences are in no way mirrored in today's cultural landscape.

This thesis sets out to investigate available images of older lesbians, to understand what there is to look at, to enjoy, to identify with – scrutinising the meanings constructed within a heteronormative society and culture. As a young lesbian researcher I find myself intrigued by these images of age and lesbian desire that speak to the way we are and how we will be (when we grow old...):

> We are at once, generation to generation, each other's future and past. Disconnected from each other, we lesbians are held prisoners of heterosexual society's perception of us.
>
> (Adelman, 1986, p15)

My interest in gender representations, in general, and in images of lesbian sexuality, in particular, thus finds a new direction in considering how

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[4] I use the expression screen in this context to include representations in film (cinema and DVD), television and, due to recent changes in viewing experience, the computer screen (which has come to be used as a DVD player, as well as providing live streaming of television content; and online video watching on websites such as *youtube*).

the identity 'old' intersects with these other identities. In due course, I came to understand that not many older lesbian characters are to be found in feature narrative films and that the few available images were at the margins of mainstream visibility.

If the encounter with Barbara Covett (in *Notes on a Scandal*) led me to question the representational possibilities for older lesbians within today's cinematic landscape, this project itself became concrete at the moment when I joined the *Centre for Women, Ageing and Media* (WAM) at the University of Gloucestershire in 2007. My investigation into the intersections of the categories of gender, age and sexuality in cinematic representations fitted neatly with the research group's aim to contribute to the emerging field of research on 'older women' across different types of media. As becomes evident in my survey of literature (in Chapters Two and Three), research on women and ageing has been monopolised by gerontology and the social sciences. There is much work to be done alongside and in addition to the dominant health and social care focused approaches to research. This thesis recognises the importance of cultural representation and its aim is to explore lesbian representations by examining the specificities of gender and sexuality as they intersect with age in a range of films (1995-2009). My focus on lesbian identities and ageing brings a fresh perspective to the study of images of ageing and provides an innovative angle within lesbian (film) studies. I situate my intervention within a cultural studies approach to representation in film. This means that I will focus on the cultural meanings contained in the intersection of age and lesbian sexuality, while having in

mind that these meanings also have an impact upon viewers of these cinematic representations.

Looking back at the turn of the twentieth-century images of older lesbian women is particularly pertinent if we consider two unique phenomena that confirm the timeliness of this research project. Firstly, the 2000s can broadly be defined as the decade when a first generation of self-identified gay men and lesbians reached old age (Herdt and De Vries, 2004b; Sang *et al.*, 1991a; Weinstock, 2004). Several authors refer to the uniqueness of this generation who experienced significant changes to the meanings attributed to homosexuality (which to an extent included a change in cultural representation) and who participated in or started to benefit from these changes (Herdt and De Vries, 2004b, p.xii; Weinstock, 2004, p177).[5]

Sang *et al.* highlight the uniqueness of this generation, pointing out that:

> All these midlife lesbians are part of a generation which has never before existed and will never exist again. We are the only generation of lesbians whose adolescent and young adult years, the time when most of us became conscious of our lesbianism, were spent in the fearful, hidden and self-hating world before the women's movement and gay liberation and whose later adult years and midlife are being spent in an era totally revolutionized by these liberation movements. Suddenly, in the early 1970s, when we were anywhere from 19 to 35, all the definitions changed. No longer were we sick, developmentally retarded, sinful or crazy. [...] After years of being vilified we were now validated.
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> (1991a, p3)

This argument can be transposed to 2011, when the cohort referred to by the above authors has transitioned from midlife to old age.

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[5] 'For the first time in history, a generation of self-identified lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender individuals are approaching retirement, and yet we know little of the health, mental health, and concomitant special social service needs of this population [...]. Even less do we understand what well-being and successful development in later life mean in these communities. Moreover, the aging processes among lesbians and gay men who are already in their retirement years, many of whom are still "closeted," remain invisible.' (Herdt and De Vries, 2004b, pxii).

The second phenomenon relates to our present cultural landscape, which has been defined as an era of new mediated visibility for lesbians and gay men. An investigation into the particularities of lesbian visibility from an age studies perspective is long overdue. What images can be located in such a post-*L Word* cultural landscape? What meanings are constructed around older lesbian characters in a context where a postfeminist perception prevails?

My contribution will provide a better understanding of today's lesbian hypervisibility paradox.[6] This concerns the presence of a multitude of lesbian and bisexual characters (across television, independent and mainstream film) while simultaneously there is a lack of more diverse lesbian images. This is the combined message of today's hypervisibility: the young, slim, white, beautiful, 'chic'[7] lesbians obfuscate the absence of other lesbian images.

The hypervisibility of postfeminist lesbian representations are characteristic of our post-*L Word* cultural landscape.[8] A previous landmark had been Ellen DeGeneres' television comedy series *Ellen* (1994-1998), giving a name to the entertainment website *AfterEllen*, as an online community of lesbian consumers of mainstream culture (who situate themselves in a post-Ellen era).[9] By 2004 however, *The L Word* becomes

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[6] The usage of hypervisibility dates back to Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1965) and his analysis of the hypervisibility of the Negro. This term has been used beyond black studies in order to approach social marginalisation in terms of gender and sexuality, for instance, of being everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Throughout this dissertation hypervisibility is instrumental in revealing the types of representation of the older woman and of the lesbian.
[7] Gill adds other neologisms, for instance, 'designer dykery, lipstick lesbianism, queer chic' (2009, p151).
[8] In Chapter Three I will explore this concept further in the context of a recent feminist critique of postfeminist cultural representations. It is important to emphasise that I am here referring to cultural texts characteristic of this discourse of postfeminism.
[9] The simultaneous 'coming out' of actress Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen Morgan in *Ellen*'s coming out episode (part one and two of 'The Puppy Episode' in season 4 in 1997) became a significant moment in lesbian visibility. The episode proved to be 'a ratings bonanza, demolishing the idea that gay topics were too controversial to retain TV viewers' valuable attention' (Gamson, 2002, p348). And although the show was cancelled the following year, its impact was undeniable.

the 'first full-on post-*Ellen* lesbian-focused dramatic TV series ever' as John

Polly observed (cited in: McCabe and Akass, 2006, p.xxvii).

The impact of a lesbian-themed series has been defined in terms of its

innovation; Sedgwick argues that:

> the quantitative effect of a merely additive change, dramatising more than one lesbian plot at a time, makes a qualitative difference in viewers' encounter with social reality. The sense of the lesbian individual, isolated or coupled, scandalous, scrutinised, staggering under her representational burden, gives way to the vastly livelier potential of a lesbian ecology.
>
> (2006, p.xxi)

I mention these television moments as they become landmarks of an

ever-changing cultural visibility that transcends the cinema/television divide.

The specific viewing context of television series – with characters who have

time to develop and whose story we share over long periods of time (usually

in the comfort of our living room) – can explain the emergence of these

landmarks of lesbian visibility among television (*Ellen*, *The L Word*) rather

than cinema.

The interconnectedness between film and television is a relevant

characteristic of the landscape of lesbian visibility in the 2000s. A good

example is the creative talent behind *The L Word*, partially composed by a

variety of writers and directors (*lesbian auteurs*) best known for their

involvement in the 'new lesbian cinema' (Pramaggiore, 1997). The

interconnectivity of lesbian texts, out actresses and lesbian auteurs is

evident in the following examples. For instance, Rose Troche (producer,

director and writer of the 1994 film *Go Fish*) wrote and produced episodes

of *The L Word* and Guinevere Turner (writer of and co-star in *Go Fish*)

wrote episodes of *The L Word* in addition to a recurring role as Gabby

Deveaux in the series. *The L Word*'s impact on film (casting) can be illustrated by *Gray Matters* (Kramer, 2006), in which one of *The L Word*'s actresses, Rachel Shelly (who plays Helena Peabody in the series), appears in a 'Helena Peabody cameo'.[10] Another example is *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (Babbit, 2007) which stars two actresses who participated in *The L-Word*, Guinevere Turner and Daniela Sea (Moira/Max in *The L-Word*), portraying secondary lesbian characters. This seems to confirm Benshoff and Griffin's claim that 'independent queer filmmaking, videomaking, and television programming may be on the verge of merging' (2006, p286). This also means that the tendencies and characteristics of our contemporary postfeminist landscape tend to replicate from one medium to the other. The older lesbian constitutes an absence within this landscape which renders invisible those images that do not conform to heteronormative youthfulness.

In cinema, a situation 'where no single character, relationship, or issue need be "the lesbian one"' (Sedgwick, 2006, p.xxiv) can generally only be found in art house and independent productions, which include a group of friends rather than a single lesbian character – for instance the already mentioned *Go Fish* (1994), *Everything Relative* (Pollack, 1996) and, more recently, *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* – where more narrative space is permitted to explore character interiority and interaction than in mainstream cinema. The latter two films, although presenting a more diverse range of age categories among the lesbian characters, maintain age segregation between characters. In *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, for instance, the

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[10] Retrospectively, the almost unnoticeable character of the babysitter at the beginning of *The Shipping News* (Hallström, 2001), will be recognised as Katherine Moenning (who plays Shane in *The L Word*). Curiously, she has the same androgynous look and funky hairstyle in this 2001 supporting role that would later (2004) become one of Shane's defining characteristics.

generational divide is established between the main character's group of friends (in their early twenties) and Sadie's partner, Courney Cadmar (Melanie Mayron), who is in her fifties. This divide runs along the lines of chronological age, type of feminist activism/ideology and age-appropriate coupling.

In recent decades, lesbian experimental film and documentary has provided images of ageing, as illustrated by *Before Stonewall* (Scagliotti & Schiller, 1984), *West Coast Crones* (Muir, 1990), *Nitrate Kisses* (Hammer, 1992), *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis at 100* (Welbon, 1999), *Lesbian Grandmothers from Mars* (Wilson, 2004) *and Out Late* (Alda & Brooke, 2008). Barbara Hammer's experimental lesbian feminist/queer video, *Nitrate Kisses*, for instance, features a couple of seventy-year old women having sex, exposing 'the reality of enduring lesbian sexuality and [urging] viewers to enter into new relations to visibility and its taboos' as Linda Dittmar suggests (1997, p82).

But this thesis is not concerned with independent cinema, queer filmmaking or documentary film.[11] I do not wish to take anything away from the importance of art house and independent films, but these productions still reach only an elite set of film festival and art house cinemagoers. The release of these productions in the film festival circuit and on restrictive DVD release (one zone only or no DVD release at all) or international distribution, means that they are available for a limited number of viewers. In addition, independent or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) film festivals

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[11] Neither is it an ethnographic or sociological study about lesbian women over 65; for work in this area see Adelman (1986), Claassen (2005), or Sang *et al.* (1991b); or an audience study (for work in this area see: Gledhill, 1991; Harwood, 1999; Healey and Ross, 2002; Hodgetts *et al.*, 2003).

usually take place in large metropolitan areas, thus further restricting their possible audience. In short, independent cinema reaches a small minority.

One of the reasons I decided to focus on Hollywood and British mainstream cinema was because of its wider reach and visibility. The meanings generated through these film texts have an impact upon an international audience (reaching even Portuguese viewers like myself). Also, mainstream film opens in most of the local cinemas and, once released on DVD, is widely distributed (internationally) and rental copies will circulate widely.

Despite the evidence that mainstream film is 'still quite squeamish when it comes to representing queer images, explicit or otherwise' (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006, p288), popular film forms provide the comfort of watching familiar narrative forms and (in case of a comedy) the promise of a happy ending. If in relation to 'lesbian romantic comedies' the focus on a lesbian relationship and the existence of a happy ending are seen as a positive change – 'an innovation from other tragic lesbian stories' (Merck, 1993, p379) – the absence of older lesbians within this genre is significant. In Chapter Three I discuss the importance of un/happy-endings. My analysis suggests that the reiteration of tragic storylines and unhappy endings for older lesbian characters emphasises their otherness as lesbian and as older women.

Faced with the paradox of the hypervisible younger lesbian and the lack of representation of the older lesbian within contemporary mainstream cinema,[12] I will consider the meanings that arise from a small number of

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[12] Although *mainstream* is to be taken in the broadest sense of the term to include an HBO (Home Box Office) television film and a British film with limited international release.

available images of age and lesbian sexuality. As Kathleen Woodward suggests, we need 'to bring the representation of the older female body into focus, and we need to reflect on what we see and what we don't' (2006, p162). My research will contribute to this much-needed reflection by providing a specifically lesbian perspective. I will investigate the meanings associated with the intersection of age and sexuality, the limitations and possibilities provided by images that become visible. As Sadie Wearing suggests: '[i]f "invisibility" is a trope long associated with older women in contemporary culture, then attention needs to be paid to the specific forms visibility might take' (2007, p298). Lesbian representation has similarly been associated to the trope of invisibility (as I will further explore in Chapter Four) and possible representations thus become more relevant.

Lesbian and *old* are two categories that are not frequently combined in research or cultural representations. Collecting my data became a daunting task as my bibliographic searches and exploration of possible film texts were met with a recurring message: *'Your search for lesbian + old was unsuccessful. Please try again'* or *'No matches were found'*.

The problem of defining what an older lesbian is emerged at an early stage of data gathering. First of all, there is little agreement on the definition of a lesbian. Adrienne Rich establishes a continuum between heterosexual and lesbian women (Rich, 1980), while Monique Wittig famously claimed that a lesbian is not a woman – since woman signifies heterosexual woman (1981/1992). Wolfe and Penelope dismiss the imperative of sexual experience with another woman (1993, p7), do not restrict their definition to self-identified lesbians (1993, p11) and thus conclude:

> First, Lesbian identity cannot be based solely on one or more sexual acts, because the experience of Lesbian sexual intimacies is not limited to lifelong Lesbians. […] Second, there is no one kind of Lesbian. Instead, because each of us comes to our Lesbianism at different times and in different circumstances, there must be several bases for terming a woman a 'Lesbian.'
>
> (1993, p12)

I decided to include representations of women who explicitly identified as lesbian, or whose interest in another woman (whether a short-term or a long-term committed relationship) was of significance to their lives. The characters analysed in this thesis include variations of what can be seen as a lesbian in film. Vera, in *Hold Back the Night* (Davis, 1999), and Agnis, in *The Shipping News* (Hallström, 2001), constitute examples of self-identified lesbian characters, while Edith and Abby, in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (Anderson, Coolidge & Heche, 2000), or Geraldine and 'The Headmistress,' in *Love Actually* (Curtis, 2003) can be identified as lesbian couples through their interaction. Barbara, in *Notes on a Scandal*, rejects a lesbian identity but her interest in Sheba (Cate Blanchett) aligns her with Stimpson's definition of a lesbian as 'a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying' (1981, p301). In Chapter Six, I expand my analysis to include characters who although not explicitly presented as lesbian can, nonetheless, be read as such by an active engagement with the film text. Judi Dench's M is chosen as the most visible, 'lesbianisable' (Whatling, 1997) older female character in contemporary mainstream cinema.

The second definition, old/er, presents a greater challenge and one inevitable question emerged for me as I embarked on my research: 'Is she old enough?' At the same time I felt reluctant in attributing specific ages to characters. How can we approach the study of age without engaging in the

'obsession with chronological age' (Woodward, 1991, p4)? How can we challenge the fear and denial of old age in our culture without engaging in that 'relentless social practice of trying to figure out someone's age' (Woodward, 1999, p.x)? We need to take into consideration both the cultural construction of age and the biological ageing of the female body.

I decided to include characters who could be considered to be over sixty years-of-age or whose social roles (retired) suggested their chronological age. This excluded several films that centre on a midlife discovery of same-sex desire. Clearly, there have been a number of television films and independent productions containing middle-aged characters who discover their more fluid sexuality once they establish a meaningful relationship with another woman. The 'coming out' storyline (in both senses the self-discovery of a lesbian or bisexual identity or of admitting a non-heterosexual identity to friends and family) can indeed be found across the ageing continuum. And it is situated at 'midlife' as a 'crisis', sharing with heterosexual midlife crises the same desire for something extra (e.g. extra-marital affairs or the acquisition of expensive items). It ranges (and I cite from both independent and mainstream productions) from teenage girls – *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (Maggenti, 1995), *All Over Me* (Sichel, 1997) – to young adults – *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001), *Imagine Me & You* (2005), Gray Matters (Kramer, 2006) – and to women in their forties and fifties – *Losing Chase* (Bacon, 1996), *The Gymnast* (Farr, 2006).

Initially identified as heterosexual, personal or relational crisis establishes the backdrop for their openness to a same-sex relationship as an alternative

to their heteronormative life.[13] *The Gymnast*, for instance, explores a female character who becomes emotionally involved with a woman in a moment of crisis. These characters' chronological age ranges from early thirties to fifties – providing a wide bracket for a midlife discovery of lesbian sexuality. Occasionally I refer to films portraying younger lesbians in order to contextualise certain common themes. While noteworthy for their inclusiveness, I have rejected such films for analysis because the main focus throughout this thesis is the lesbian woman over sixty. It is this woman who is both invisible (as lesbian) and hypervisible (as older).

The films in this study appear heterogeneous in terms of genre and production contexts although they can be defined as feature narrative films. In addition to the parameters of age and sexual identity of the characters, I established a time frame, from the late 1990s to 2009 and limited the country of origin to the United States and the UK.[14] Releases within the decade of the 1980s were excluded in order to allow a focus on more recent images produced in an era of 'new' lesbian visibility.[15] This meant that two films that indirectly or partially address my concern in this study had to be rejected – *The Hunger* (Scott, 1983) and *The Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985). *The Hunger* presents an interesting notion of ageing as disease – a malaise that troubles humans – represented here by the scientist Dr Sarah Roberts (Susan Sarandon), specialist in premature ageing disorders – and

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[13] Adding to the two films mentioned above: *Lianna* (Sayles, 1983); *Claire of the Moon* (Conn, 1992), *Late Bloomers* (Dyer, 1995); *Between Two Women* (Woodstock, 2000); *Julie Johnson* (Gosse, 2001), *Gypo* (Dunn, 2005). All these examples explore female characters who become emotionally involved with a woman and realise that their relationship/marriage is in crisis. The lesbian classic *Desert Hearts* (Deitch, 1985), for instance, famously features one of the characters' trip to Nevada in order to get a divorce.

[14] I limited my research to English-language films produced in countries that are famous for their 'transatlantic crossings' (Street, 2002) of distribution, actors and directors.

[15] Although it has to be said that among the most popular lesbian films of this decade – *Desert Hearts* (1985), *Lianna* (1982), *Personal Best* (Towne, 1982) and *She Must Be Seeing Things* (McLaughlin, 1987) – no lesbian over 60 featured.

vampires John (David Bowie) and Miriam (Catherine Deneuve) alike. Vampirism is a pervasive theme in cinema and can be explained through 'anxieties about the aging process and the desire for immortality' (Abbott, 2007, p134).[16] *The Color Purple* would have provided a much-needed exploration of the issue of race in addition to ageing and sexuality. Bisexual Shug (Margaret Avery) is older than Celie (Whoppi Goldberg) but only in the final scene do these characters appear 'aged.' This film's erasure of lesbianism, which featured prominently in the source novel (Walker, 1983), and its substitution for female bonding has been one of the points of critique (Kitzinger and Kitzinger, 1993; Stacey, 1995). Celie and Shug's sexual relationship is suggested by a chaste kiss on the lips.

The films that constitute the main focus of this thesis were released between 1995 and 2009 with films starring Judi Dench at the bookend with her first participation in the Bond film franchise with the 1995 *GoldenEye* (Campbell) and her participation in *Rage* (2009, Potter).

In the next two chapters of this thesis I consider the contexts and main concepts that have informed my research into the representation of older lesbians in contemporary mainstream film. This project's specific structure is a direct outcome of my research and findings. A necessary interdisciplinary approach resulted in a large number of literature sources being surveyed – which I separated into Chapter Two and Chapter Three. In the first one, I explore existing studies on age and ageing, while in the second I relate the category of age (identity) to existing studies on the representation of ageing

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[16] It should be noted here that although I use the UK spelling 'ageing' throughout the thesis there will be instances, as is the case in the above quotation, where the spelling 'aging' is adopted keeping with the source text.

femininities in film, lesbian images on screen and theories of (oppositional) viewing practices.

The context of postfeminist cultural representation provides a valuable theoretical basis to start my discussion. The originality of my contribution consists of taking two marginalised concepts – lesbian and ageing – and placing them into the centre of a sustained analysis of cinematic representation. Drawing on previous research in the area of lesbian film studies on the one hand and on ageing studies on the other, I highlight the interventions to be made in both fields (a discussion I divided into two individual chapters).

In Chapter Four, I commence my analysis with three films containing characters who are self-identified older lesbians, in accordance with an identity politics-based 'positive images' approach to lesbians in film. This approach constructs a lesbian viewer looking for explicitly defined, lesbian images whose sexual orientation cannot be denied and who provides 'positive' role models for lesbian and bisexual women in the audience.

Throughout this chapter, the older lesbian appears as a supporting character (except in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, but even here it can be argued that she is 'supporting' the younger characters through this film's narrative aim). I will thus analyse several films in which I locate a shared underlying theme of terminal illness, death and mourning. The lesbian as widow is the predominant figure in this chapter in which at least one of the characters in each film is or becomes a widow.[17] I apply the concept of the apparitional lesbian (Castle, 1993) to one of the paradigms of representing

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[17] In this context, widowhood is seen in terms of a same-sex relationship, irrespective of being in a civil partnership or not. Quoting the words of character Agnis Hamm (Judi Dench) in *The Shipping News*: 'We weren't married, but that's a technicality.'

the older lesbian in film – the ghosted. The combination of the 'traditional' tragic lesbian storyline (Russo, 1987) with the narrative of ageing as decline (Hepworth, 2000) establishes the continuity of the ghostly and invisible lesbian. My main argument in this chapter ultimately relates to the lack of happy endings for older lesbians in film (with one exception as we will see). This becomes particularly problematic when, in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, a fundamental disparity in terms of tone, genre and narrative closure can be mapped onto a binary divide between the older lesbians (in the first segment) and the younger lesbians (in the second and third segments). The older lesbian is here ghosted and thus 'othered.'

In Chapter Five, I analyse a character portrayed in accordance with cinematic lesbian stereotypes, while she herself rejects a lesbian identity – Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) in *Notes on a Scandal*. The fact that a non-heterosexual older woman becomes the protagonist (or rather the co-protagonist alongside Sheba Hart) has an impact on this chapter's content. As opposed to the various different characters and films analysed in the previous chapter, here I examine one single film (and focus on one character, Barbara) that establishes the continuity of another trope long associated to lesbian representations – the monstrous 'other'. *Notes on a Scandal* raises questions about 'positive' and 'negative' images and about the co-existence of stereotypical (1960s-like) images and post-New Queer Cinema (Aaron, 2004) representations. Its representation of same-sex desire forces us to reconsider the visibility of the older lesbian woman in a post-*L Word* cultural landscape.

After considering how Barbara is constructed as the abject, ageing 'other' I distance my reading from the 'negative' images perspective and explore the possibilities of a queer reading. By rejecting a lesbian identity/label this character can be aligned with queer theory's refusal of fixed identity categories (Jagose, 1996). Drawing on the work of Margrit Shildrick (2002), Barbara's monstrousness will be considered in terms of its disruption of a heteronormative 'ideal' of youthful femininity. I conclude that this stereotypically monstrous lesbian image can be seen as empowering as this character transgresses age-appropriate forms of desire and challenges the asexual construct of the spinster. Her relentless pursuit of younger women 'friends' can be seen as a queer denial of being defined as 'past' her prime as an older woman in a youth-centred society.

While a queer embrace of 'negative' images (Pidduck, 2003, p284) has its limitations, oppositional readings of non-lesbian images can provide the opportunity to 'expand the possibilities for lesbian identification and desire' (Whatling, 1997, p5). While lesbian appropriations have been well documented in previous studies (as I will explore in my literature survey), older characters have not been considered in terms of a lesbian reading. In Chapter Six, I complement my analysis of Judi Dench's characters in previously analysed films with an analysis of other similarly 'transgressive' film roles across her career. No sustained research was located that focused on this actress' film career, and my contribution in this chapter fills a gap in this respect in addition to pursuing my main aim – to locate representations of older lesbians in film. I here draw on a variety of discourses, considering the meanings contained in newspaper and

magazine articles, websites and online forums. Through this reading I contrast Dench's public perception as a 'national treasure' with a succession of transgressive female characters and 'lesbian' roles. I conclude that whilst the public discourse contains underlying ageist and sexist principles, Dench's film persona presents a set of refreshingly alternative roles for older women and contributes (by way of her acting pedigree and status) to an increased visibility of the lesbian roles she performs. In Chapter Six, I also recover an earlier mode of lesbian viewership in order to extend practices of lesbian appropriation to an older actress and her characters. Dench's recurring role as M in the Bond films is of particular interest in this reading, seen that M is a considerably powerful image that challenges traditional gender roles and age appropriate behaviour. In other words, the possibilities of appropriating heterosexual texts and images is seen as a legitimate resource to compensate for the lack and stereotypical representations of older lesbian women. I conclude that although these oppositional readings present their limitations, this active engagement opens up a wider range of possible identifications and mainstream pleasures.

In conclusion, Chapter Seven draws together the themes explored throughout this thesis, presenting the central findings from each chapter. I also consider the overall outcomes and implications of this research and present suggestions for further study.

Chapter Two

Approaching Age Studies

Introduction

In this chapter I will consider a range of literature that has informed my research on screen images of older lesbian women. Setting out the theoretical framework for my thesis involves an interdisciplinary approach. In what follows, I will draw on age studies from a wide range of disciplines to explore what is an under-researched category in both feminist theories and lesbian studies. I identify the main theoretical concepts which will inform my analysis of the intersections of ageing, gender and sexuality in images of older lesbians in film. Intersectional approaches have been found to enable more inclusive, diversity aware approaches in the area of feminist studies.

Originally intended to address the experiences of women of colour (Crenshaw, 1989; Crenshaw, 1994), who 'fell between the cracks of both feminist and anti-racist discourse' (Davis, 2008, p68), such a perspective becomes imperative in a work like this. I place my research at the intersection of two areas of research: the representation of the older heterosexual woman in film – and the two main paradigms of representation – and screen images of the lesbian – highlighting the hypervisibility of 'lesbian chic' in contemporary representations. Both paradigms exclude lesbian women in their sixties, seventies, eighties or beyond. As the predominant modes of representing the older woman and the lesbian woman converge, images are doubly excluded.

My main contribution will consist of establishing the connections between identity categories usually analysed within compartmentalised disciplines. In accordance with the interdisciplinary endeavour of cultural studies I will

connect gender, age and sexuality in a long overdue study of older lesbian women's screen images. My contribution will further the research into images of ageing, the representation of older women, lesbian studies and lesbian cultural criticism. In what follows, I survey the literature that has informed my analysis, and I identify the areas where I will intervene.

I begin with a consideration of possible reasons for the neglect of ageing as a main subject within feminist studies and how a lesbian perspective can challenge certain heterosexist assumptions around ageing, attractiveness and sexuality. Next, I discuss the main concepts within age studies; and place the images of lesbian ageing within the broader context of the two perceptions of ageing. Ageist stereotypes within both approaches to ageing will be linked to existing modes of representing the older heterosexual woman in film. I will establish associations between the 'disappearing' lesbian and heterosexual bodies by building on existing film theory. Research on postfeminist cultural texts will be explored in order to illustrate the limits imposed on lesbian visibility within this framework.

Survey of Literature: Age, Gender and Sexuality

Women and ageing is an expanding area of research interest and past and forthcoming conferences and forthcoming titles indicate that a gap has been identified.[18] Monopolised by the health and social sciences, attention to the representation of older women in media is rising.

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[18] For instance, the 2008 International Conference 'Crossing Cultures: Women, Ageing and Media,' Cheltenham, UK; or Theorizing Age: Challenging the Disciplines, 7th International Symposium On Cultural Gerontology: Inaugural Conference Of The European Network In Aging Studies (ENAS), Maastricht University, The Netherlands, 6-9 October 2011. For publications, see Dolan (forthcoming).

The themes explored within age studies have been growing in number and variety over the years and are no longer confined to gerontology (social, critical gerontology), health and social care or sociology that dominate the existing knowledge in the area of age/ing studies (Biggs, 2002; Bond and Coleman, 1990; Bytheway *et al.*, 1989; Fennell *et al.*, 1988; Twigg, 2004; Twigg, 2007). Feminist approaches to gerontology (Calasanti, 2009; Holstein and Minkler, 2003; Twigg, 2004) changed mainstream gerontology's neglect of gender, as did an exploration of later life and gender within sociology (Arber and Ginn, 1991; 1995).

Explorations of non-normative sexuality can similarly be found within these disciplines (Berger, 1982; Gabbay and Wahler, 2002; Healey, 1994), although a more heterocentric tendency prevails in age studies in general (Bernard *et al.*, 2000; Blaikie, 1999; Featherstone and Wernick, 1995). As John Lee points out (referring to the invisibility of older homosexual men in 1960s and 1970s research), '[m]ost aging studies assumed their respondents were heterosexual and married' (1991, p50). Coyle's collection on women and ageing, for instance, does not include a section on non-heterosexual identities (1997). More recent studies include studies from a non-normative perspective (Gabbay and Wahler, 2002; Herdt and De Vries, 2004a; Pugh, 2002), addressed mainly within the areas of sociology and social science (Berger, 1984; Blando, 2001; Heaphy *et al.*, 2004; Kimmel, 1978; Rosenfeld, 1999; 2003), and psychology (D'Augelli et al., 2001; Kimmel and Sang, 2002) while other disciplines have been reluctant to incorporate research on lesbian and gay ageing. One of the most encompassing collections on gay and lesbian studies (Herdt and De Vries,

2004a) is likewise in the area of gerontology. Studies specifically on lesbian women are in minority, as a quick look at contents lists can confirm, for instance Barker (2004) or Weinstock (2004), suggesting an imbalance in terms of gender within gay and lesbian studies. Stephen Pugh's appropriately titled 'The Forgotten. A Community without a Generation – Older Lesbians and Gay Men' recognises the fact that literature about older lesbians and gay men is growing but dispersed (2002). Pugh's work constitutes a comprehensive literature review on central themes around the ageing experience from a lesbian and gay perspective. What is significant is that, in a brief section about 'images' of older lesbians and gay men, focusing on generalised perceptions and stereotypes, no research on the representation in television or film is mentioned. This indicates that more work is needed in this specific area – an issue I wish to address.

Most of the above studies combine gay male and lesbian ageing, but there are two studies that provide an overview of available research in the area of lesbian ageing. Barker summarises this literature and highlights dimensions such as social support, family relations, health, economics and occupation, housing, and access to services as relevant points of intervention (2004). Gabbay and Wahler's review of literature similarly focuses specifically on lesbian ageing (2002), but as is the case with the above mentioned research, mostly within the health and social services disciplines, their survey is concerned with lesbian gerontology.

Recent research at postgraduate level seems to indicate that there is a growing interest in analysing the intersection of the categories of ageing and lesbian identity in more varied disciplines: ranging from participant

studies (Henry, 2004b; Schneider, 1998) to a literary analysis of age and lesbian identity (Lowery, 2007) or the study of lesbian images across different media (Traies, 2009). My intervention seeks to contribute to this slowly expanding area of research by addressing the particular lacuna within film studies. Due to the lack of screen images itself, it is understandable that no significant work has been done considering the intersection of old age and lesbian sexuality. The exception is Dittmar's fundamental analysis of the older lesbian in documentary film (1997). Despite its focus on documentaries, Dittmar's study provides some insight into the intersection between the narratives of ageing and lesbian identities.

Since I locate my own research at the intersection of feminist and cultural age studies (Markson, 2003; Wearing, 2007; Woodward, 2006) and lesbian film studies (Holmlund, 2002; Tasker, 1994; Weiss, 1992; Wilton, 1994a), I will consider relevant literature in these areas in subsequent sections. I will address these distinct areas of neglected research by introducing an exploration of age within lesbian studies and by challenging heteronormative age studies. As Tamsin Wilton suggests, 'the recognition of lesbian existence and the articulation of a lesbian voice tends to disrupt the unquestioningly heterocentric practices of the academy, within whatever disciplinary context' (1995, p14). In the context of age studies, introducing a lesbian voice can challenge both a gender-blind gerontology and heterocentric feminist approaches to ageing. Recognising 'lesbian-ness', to use Wilton's words, when approaching representations of older female bodies in film can provide an unique perspective to gender, age and sexuality.

Approaching Age Studies: Main concepts

Before I start discussing the main concepts within age studies a brief word about the terms used to designate old age is necessary. The use of terms varies according to authors and disciplines. In gerontology, the avoidance of the term 'old' has resulted in the use of expressions such as 'life cycle', 'life span', 'late life', 'later life' as substitutes for 'old age' (Woodward, 1991, p21). Arber and Ginn refer to a variety of age-based sub-divisions in sociological texts, such as 'young elderly' (under 75), 'old elderly' (over 75), 'oldest old' or 'very old' (over 85) (1991, p3). Throughout this thesis I use the term *older* to suggest a chronological age of over sixty, avoiding the term *old* to allow for a more flexible approach. I use the spelling 'ageing' throughout the thesis (as I am writing the thesis in a UK institution), except when quoting from source texts using the US spelling 'aging.'

Andrew Blaike's point is relevant here. Blaikie argues that 'to talk of *the* elderly is to create a category of people definable by their elderliness alone (they can possess no existence independent of their elderliness, and are thus considered 'not fully human')' (1999, p16).[19] He continues: 'If sex was the taboo subject of the nineteenth century, and death that of the twentieth, perhaps deep old age will be the great prohibition of the twenty-first' (1999, p109).

According to Robert Butler, who first coined the term ageism in the 1960s (see also: Butler, 1980; Bytheway, 1995; 2005), there are three interrelated aspects to it. Firstly, '[p]rejudicial attitudes toward the aged, toward old age, and toward the aging process, including attitudes held by the elderly themselves'; secondly, 'discriminatory practices against the elderly' and

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[19] Italics in original.

finally 'institutional practices and policies which, often without malice, perpetuate stereotypic beliefs about the elderly, reduce their opportunities for a satisfactory life and undermine their personal dignity' (Butler, 1980, p8).

These prejudicial attitudes and beliefs circulate within culture and in its most extreme form become visible as stereotypes. Ageist stereotypes express predominant ideas about the ageing process, constructing ageing as a process of decline and reifying ageism as acceptable, as Bill Bytheway maintains:

> Ageism generates and reinforces a fear and denigration of the ageing process, and stereotyping presumptions regarding competence and the need for protection. [...] In particular, ageism legitimates the use of chronological age to mark out classes of people who are systematically denied resources and opportunities that others enjoy, and who suffer the consequences of such denigration, ranging from well-meaning patronage to un-ambiguous vilification.
>
> (1995, p14)

The present study is mostly concerned with cultural stereotypes of older women and their intersection with hetero/sexist stereotypes of the lesbian woman. As age and gender categories intersect, a double standard of ageing becomes apparent (Sontag, 1972), a central concern of feminist age studies.

For women in particular normative patterns of behaviour become associated to different age groups. Vivian Wood notes that a 'number of studies and observations suggest emergent norms in varying degrees of crystallization about appropriate behavior for older persons enacting specific

roles' (1971, np).[20] In addition to normative gender-roles, the older woman becomes subjected to expectations about age-appropriate behaviour patterns, dress codes and types of relationship. Although these norms change according to social and cultural developments, for instance the emergence of the 'sexy oldie', growing old 'gracefully' is imperative and inappropriately dressed women are negatively described as 'mutton dressed as lamb' (Fairhurst, 1998; Twigg, 2007). According to Twigg, '[f]or many older women, one of the most powerful discursive formations that restrains their clothes' choices is the old cultural trope, "mutton dressed as lamb"' (2007, p295).[21]

Ageist stereotypes can manifest in different forms and according to two main paradigms of ageing. As I will argue throughout this thesis, intersecting age and sexuality along the lines of these paradigms reveals the limited options of older lesbians' representability.

Ageing as Decline

Social constructions of the 'ageing as decline' perspective are associated with the medical-scientific discourse that focuses on the loss of abilities and the occurrence of disease, also called the 'misery approach' (Öberg, 2003) or the 'decline and loss' paradigm (Holstein and Minkler, 2003). This type of discourse ignores the fact that there is more to ageing than a biologically determined loss of capabilities, and that the negative aspects of ageing do not have to be seen as the norm: 'generalizations made about elderly people dwell on decline of mental faculties, loss of physical capabilities,

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[20] Some electronic sources are displayed on a website without the indication of page numbers. When this is the case, 'np' at the end of a parenthetical reference indicates that no page number is available.
[21] Or, to use the updated version: 'Whitney dressed as Britney.'

slowness, uselessness and financial dependency' (Arber & Ginn, 1991, p35). The difficulty of distinguishing between the body in decline and advanced old age, derives, as Woodward recognises, from the cultural and social meanings constructed around the ageing body:

> The inevitable and literal association of advanced old age with increasing frailty and ultimately death itself presents a limit beyond which we cannot go. The body in advanced old age not only represents death; it is close to death and will in due time be inhabited by death.
>
> (1991, pp18-19)

Elsewhere, Woodward emphasises the need to distinguish between 'biological aging and aging that is produced by culture' (1999, pp.xv). The cultural construction of ageing as decline (Gullette, 1997; 2004) is central to my exploration of cinematic images of the older lesbian. The perpetuation of the concept of decline around older lesbian characters in the films I will be discussing is problematic, as I will explore in Chapter Four. I will argue that a return to lesbian 'killing off' storylines, but now increasingly in the form of the narrative of decline, combines mechanisms of heterosexist and ageist erasure.

The critique of the ageing as decline paradigm does not seek to deny the possibility of disease as Margaret Cruikshank explains, in regards of this particular stereotype of late life: 'The stereotype is equating the two' (2003, p152). Ageist assumptions derived from this perspective, contribute to a normalisation of ageist language and attitudes within society, since they are not merely descriptive, rather, stereotypes are prescriptive (Arber & Ginn, 1991, p35).

As with all stereotypes, ageist stereotypes are based on recognisable traits that, while containing elements of truth, consist of generalisations. As

Dyer points out, 'stereotypes express particular definitions of reality, with concomitant evaluations, which in turn relate to the disposition of power within society' (2002, p14).

The ageing body can be constructed as a body in decline, as mentioned above, or as the active body of the senior citizen. In Chapter Five, I will explore the construction of the ageing body as the abject 'other' within a culture which takes the youthful as its norm. For now, I address the concepts underlying these cultural constructions as defined by research on ageing.

The Ageing Body in Decline

The ageing body presents a challenge to the theory that conceives of bodies as a social and cultural construction. Bordo takes a critical stance to this notion 'that the body is a tabula rasa, awaiting inscription by culture' (2003, p35), but concedes that the historical context of the body is relevant to some extent:

> In some areas biology may play a very great role in our destinies, and it always informs our lives to varying degrees. However, even in those areas where biology may play a more formidable role, its effect is never "pure," never untouched by history.
>
> (2003, p36)

Underlying the dilemma about ageing as culturally constructed or as essentially biological, hinted at in feminist considerations of ageing (Woodward, 1999, p.xv), is the wider Culture versus Biology debate.

In discourses of ageing as decline, biological determinism constructs the ageing body as a body in decline and as medicalised (Cruikshank, 2003,

p2). The ageing body has negative connotations with decline, decay and is linked to passivity and frailty (Sandberg, 2008, p123). The ageing body in decline is constructed as an asexual body, despite evidence against the decline of sexual desire in old age (Riggs and Turner, 1999).

Against these narratives of decline, several authors have presented alternatives emphasising ageing as a more complex process (Chivers, 2003; Gullette, 1997; Hepworth, 2000; Paulson and Willig, 2008). Hepworth highlights that ageing 'is not a straightforward linear trajectory towards inevitable physical, personal and social decline but a dynamic process of highly variable change' (2000, p1). Paulson and Willig present a study on women's embodiment of their ageing bodies and the discursive production of certain body parts according to the concept of ageing as decline (2008).

It is within this framework of ageing as decline that predominant images of terminal disease, of death and dying can be perceived as establishing the continuity of certain ageist stereotypes, despite contrasting images of successful ageing in more recent film texts. As I will further suggest, the narrative of biological decline is associated with the representation of the ageing *other*. And as certain paradigms of representing the lesbian in film converge with the above, the older lesbian characters are 'other' on multiple levels. In Chapter Four, I explore the paradigm of ageing as decline analysing its overlap with the tendency to 'kill-off' the lesbian character observed by gay film historians (Russo, 1987).

Age Denial and Resistance

Age identity and identification are complex and research has shown that individuals' identification with an age category – 'how old they felt, looked, acted, and desired to be' (Montepare and Lachman, 1989, p73) – fluctuates from adolescence to the later years. If ageing is constructed as an inevitably negative process – as decline, illness and loss – the tendency is to identify *against* the identity 'old'. Biggs contextualises this tendency to 'mask' one's age within the wider context of social masking as a process of identity management (1997). Research on age identification suggests that distancing processes – against the label 'old' – can be seen as a rejection of the negative stereotypes associated with this label and identity (Hurd, 1999; Slevin, 2006). Conducting research in a senior centre, Hurd notes that people would:

> actively distance themselves from those whom they consider to be old and strive to present an alternative example of what it means to age. Indeed, the center members define old age and widowhood as the "best times of their lives," vehemently reject ageist images and expectations and use terms such as "young-old," "youthful" and "young-at-heart" to describe themselves.
>
> (1999, np)

Kathleen Slevin identified a similar strategy of negotiation of one's age identity in her study of older lesbians (but this tendency is found in heterosexuals also as seen in the studies I refer to next). The need to identify against the category 'old' went to the extreme of the avoidance of the participants' same-age peers (Slevin, 2006, p256). Slevin associates this avoidance with the idea of old age as contagion and the need to create 'social distance between oneself and other old people' (2006, p256).

This distance from the identity old, created through declarations such as 'I feel young inside' have been approached critically – youth/fullness is valued to the detriment of old age:

> Old people are old, and when they declare 'I don't feel old, I feel young inside' what they are trying to express is that they do not identify with the false stereotype of what an 'old person' is commonly supposed to be.
>
> (Gibson, 2000, p775)

Distinguishing between age resistance and age denial becomes problematic. Julia Twigg proposes the 'obvious feminist response': 'to attempt to resist the devaluation of being old while not attempting to deny age as such' (2004, p63). Cruikshank suggests the following distinction: 'With the former, I deliberately step out of the box provided for me by deeply-ingrained cultural messages. In denial, on the other hand, I claim to be ageless or exceptional' (2008, p150). One form of challenging this construction of old age is through the paradigm of 'successful' or 'positive' ageing.

Positive Ageing/Ageing Successfully

The second approach to ageing and age studies has been termed 'positive ageing' or 'successful ageing' (Rowe and Kahn, 1987; 1997) and can be located within the discourse of 'new gerontology'. New gerontology is based on this concept of ageing with its 'vigorous emphasis on the potential for and indeed the likelihood of a healthy and engaged old age' (Holstein and Minkler, 2003, p787).

This perspective seeks to counteract the previous paradigm of ageing as decline and loss (Dobrof, 2001; Franklin and Tate, 2009; Holstein and Minkler, 2003; Karlamangla and Seeman, 2007; Minichiello and Coulson,

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2005). Success in this sense is multidimensional and encompasses successfully avoiding disease, maintaining a productive and active life (physically, mentally, socially and sexually) (Rowe and Kahn, 1997).

The discourse of positive ageing has, as Featherstone and Hepworth point out, 'spread beyond the endeavours of social gerontologists and other professionals' (1995, p32); and has become a significant feature of popular culture (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995, p32; Öberg, 2003, p103). Blaikie describes the image of the older citizen, constructed within the positive ageing framework, as someone who is encouraged 'not just to dress "young" and look youthful, but to exercise, have sex, diet, take holidays, socialise in ways indistinguishable from those of their children's generation' (1999, p104).

The proliferation of 'positive' images of ageing has to be understood within the broader context of 'positive' media images. The debate around positive images dates back to the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s and its influence on feminist film studies which identified the need to challenge the predominant 'negative' representation of women in film (Artel and Wengraf, 1990; Waldman, 1990). The debate around 'positive' images became central to feminist film criticism, as I will further explore in the following chapter. According to this perspective, stereotypes are a 'negative' thing, while 'positive' and inspiring images are seen to be beneficial in terms of an affirmative identity politics.

While recognising the importance of positive images of ageing for dismantling ageist stereotypes (Rowe and Kahn, 1997), this concept of positive ageing has to be approached critically (Holstein and Minkler, 2003;

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Katz, 2001).[22] The proliferation of 'positive' images has transformed the concept of successful ageing into an obligation, into the extreme of another set of cultural stereotypes – that of the active senior citizen and 'the sexual senior citizen' (Katz and Marshall, 2003).

In terms of media representation, there seems to be tension between these two conceptions, one stressing the frail, ageing body gradually losing capacities and the other, highlighting the possibilities of the ageing body, an extremely youthful and active body, prolonging midlife indefinitely. Peter Öberg recognises that the ageing body in late modernity 'is situated in this "gap" or "tension" between opportunities and problems, success and failure, youthful idealizations, new opportunities and ageist encounters, and virtual self-identity and marginalized social identities' (2003, p103). This gap between opportunities and problems to which Öberg refers can be assumed to be 'wider' in the case of the ageing lesbian body where the invisibility paradox of older lesbian representation is confronted with youthful idealisations of 'chic' lesbians.

While the discourse that constructs old age as characterised by decline, decrepitude and death is harmful in its negatively inclined generalisations, the discourse that insists on the possibility of ageing 'successfully' – with its focus on a youthful appearance, and a physically, mentally and sexually active life – creates a set of expectations that are equally difficult to live up to. Holstein and Minkler have characterised the discourse of new gerontology, and the phrase 'successful ageing' itself as normative (2003). The authors maintain that,

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[22] The need for 'positive images' has equally been part of the rhetoric of gay and lesbian studies. This will be further explored in the next chapter.

> Understood as an objective, scientific discourse, the new gerontology upholds a certain status, defined primarily in terms of health, and labels those who exemplify these standards as aging successfully. This stance affirms normative value commitments, offering ways to think about – and judge – our choices (now and in the past), actions, and their results.
>
> (Holstein and Minkler, 2003, p791)

From a feminist perspective, it has been argued that the demands of ageing successfully can be a cause of anxiety for women, as, once more, they are required to discipline their bodies in order to look youthful: the 'bodies featured in the media are never old; and the emphasis on perfectionism and the visible eradication of age is reinforced in the growing industry of age denial' (Twigg, 2004, p61). The mandates of successful ageing create standards and norms in terms of health, lifestyle and sexual activity. Thus emerges the concept of the 'sexy oldie,' which according to Merryn Gott is a myth that 'identifies remaining sexual as not merely a choice, but a responsibility for older people' (2005, p2). Indeed, the celebration of the 'sexy oldie' can be seen as problematic insofar as it extends the objectification of women's bodies beyond a 'certain age', which 'though well intentioned and accurate, to a degree objectifies aging bodies' as Chivers notes (2003, p.ix).[23] Calasanti, Slevin and King recognise the normativity of 'successful ageing' when stating that '[r]ather than having to deny old age, or to strive to look young, old people should be able to be flabby, contemplative, or sexual, or not' (2006, p26).

What these authors fail to address in their critique of 'successful ageing' is that the correctly identified normative tone is, in fact, heteronormative. Just as the opposite assumption of asexual old age is created within

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[23] In our increasingly hypersexual culture this responsibility of remaining sexual is thus extending beyond middle age, while at the same time being sexy and sexual emerges as commonplace 'behaviour' and seemingly only option for many younger girls (Walter, 2010).

heteronormativity, 'the sexual senior citizen' (Katz and Marshall, 2003) can be presumed heterosexual. The youthful appearance demanded by the 'successful ageing' discourse corresponds to the heteronormative beauty ideal (Coupland, 2007), while the discourse of the active senior citizen revolves around the middle-aged heterosexual couple, the active grandparents, in short, the retired heterosexual senior (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1995). Indeed, 'the marketing of lifelong sex' (Katz and Marshall, 2003, p8) and the representations of sexual older bodies are contained within the bounds of romantic, monogamous heterosexuality. This means that lesbian older bodies will necessarily constitute a representational challenge in terms of mainstream visibility.

Analysing lesbians in documentary film, Dittmar presents a critical stance towards the representation of lesbian old age in terms of successful and positive ageing:

> In fact, all these documentaries studiously avoid questions of illness, isolation, poverty, the need for elder care, and feelings about impending death, and they generally avoid discussing race, ethnicity, and social class. If anything, the impulse is to resort to positive representations envisioned within a white middle-class norm. [...] lesbian old age looks pretty good. [...] Nowhere do we hear about unemployment and poverty; about hysterectomies, cancers, or heart disease; about long-term disabilities, self-insurance, or familial marginality.
>
> (1997, p75)

My own analysis reveals a rather different picture. As I will argue in Chapter Four, there is an excess of depictions of disease and death among the limited images available. A sustained investigation into fictional portrayals of older lesbians is thus imperative, focusing on more recent examples of narrative feature films and the possibilities of lesbian representation within our contemporary visual landscape.

Sexuality and Old Age

The prevalence of the young, slim, white female body is representative of our culture's focus on the young and traditionally beautiful, and not necessarily restricted to lesbian representation. In this ideological context of rejection and fear of ageing, the bodies of older women are absent from visual representation:

> The shame of ageing is perpetuated when old bodies are hidden from view. Young naked female bodies are everywhere [...], but where can naked bodies of old women be seen? [...] The absence of naked old female bodies deprives women of all ages from knowing what old bodies look like.
>
> (Cruikshank, 2003, p149)

Several authors mention the taboo of the naked female body (Markson, 2003, p99), defining sex in old age as 'the last great taboo' (Bytheway, 1995, p84; Vares, 2009). Old age is constructed either as perverse or as asexual. Riggs and Turner explain how the general public have an ageist perception of older people's sexuality, which they consider as being 'perverse' (1999, p203). Despite evidence of the contrary, Minichiello *et al.* argue that 'it is not easy to correct the myth of the asexual older person given the cultural predisposition to favour youthfulness and to associate sexual attraction with being young' (2005, p78).

Weinstock similarly argues that because of 'ageism, there is also a decreased likelihood that people will look at a midlife or late-life lesbian couple and think about sex' (2004, p181). In addition to ageism, this perception is linked to the hypervisibility of the (hetero)sexualised younger lesbian. The image of the older lesbian woman thus implies a cultural paradox. The cultural construct of *old woman*, 'perceived as both asexual

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and sexually unattractive' (Fullmer *et al.*, 1999, p137) stands in contradiction to *lesbian*, essentially defined in terms of her non-normative sexuality:

> A paradox exists in that social constructs of lesbians emphasize sexuality while social constructs of aging women emphasize passivity and loss of sexuality. We suspect that this paradox serves to contribute to the invisibility of older lesbians in both heterosexual and lesbian communities.
>
> (Fullmer *et al.*, 1999, p145)

The idea of asexual old age is anchored to an association between sexuality and reproduction (Gott, 2005, p20); as well as between sexual attractiveness and sexual activity:

> The norms against which women's sexual attractiveness and, thereby, inherent sexuality are measured, leave little room for the old body. With every wrinkle, grey hair and pound gained, women move away from the 'sexy' body and, crucially, become perceived as less sexual.
>
> (Gott, 2005, p18)

Therefore, the term *asexual* (or rather, *hetero-asexual*) gains its meaning within heterosexual regimes of thought and can easily be subverted by a lesbian perspective on female sexuality.

The above discussed concepts are central to the intersection of age, gender and sexuality. I will return to them at various points throughout this thesis, in particular as the successful ageing paradigm encompasses contemporary modes of representing the older heterosexual woman, for instance in the so-called 'older bird chick flick' genre (Tally, 2008). Within this paradigm, the ageing female body corresponds to the 'sexy oldie', an image which has been problematised within a feminist critique of postfeminist cultural representations (McKenna, 2002; McRobbie, 2004; Tasker and Negra, 2007a).

Feminist Approaches to Ageing

As recognised by Woodward, ageism is 'entrenched within feminism itself' (1999, p.xi). Indeed, several authors have pointed towards the neglect of ageing and old age within feminist theories (Browne, 1998; Calasanti, 2008; Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Rosenthal, 1990; Woodward, 1995). Tony Calasanti, Kathleen Slevin and Neal King similarly argue that the concerns about ageism have been relegated to a secondary status among women's studies scholars and activists (2006).

According to Woodward, the second wave feminism's neglect of old age can be explained by its focus on 'issues that are associated with earlier years in the life course' (1999, p.xi), such as, 'reproductive rights, child care, and the right to enter certain domains of work' (p.xi). Arber and Ginn present the same reasons for the neglect of later life in feminist sociological research:

> There are historical reasons for the feminist focus on younger women's concerns. The American Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s was a movement of younger women, often disillusioned with the sexism within radical movements for Civil Rights and peace, and its demands were related to their experiences. The British Women's Liberation Movement also reflected this orientation to younger women's concerns in its agenda of safe contraception, legal abortion, child-care provision, equality at work, legal and financial independence and protection from male harassment and violence.
>
> (1991, p28)

Susan Sontag's influential article 'The double standard of aging' (1972) was one of the first to articulate how gender differences shape the experience of ageing. Sontag argues that, for women, the experience of ageing implies suffering and loss, since higher beauty standards, strictly defined by a youthful appearance, apply to women more than men: '[t]hus,

for most women, aging means a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification. [...] They are old as soon as they are no longer very young' (p32). What Sontag's article emphasises are the cultural aspects of ageing, specifically how the beauty ideals which are those of a young woman, or even girl, result in anxiety in the ageing woman.

Two decades later Naomi Wolf elaborates on the oppressive regimes of normative beauty ideals that women are subjected to (1990). In the following passage, she briefly addresses how, within the ideology of the beauty myth, ageing signifies loss of beauty and creates derision between 'young' women and 'old' women:

> Aging in women is 'unbeautiful' since women grow more powerful with time, and since the links between generations of women must always be newly broken: Older women fear young ones, young women fear old, and the beauty myth truncates for all the female life span.
>
> (Wolf, 1990, p14)

In the 1980s Barbara Macdonald and Cynthia Rich wrote an influential collection of essays, *Look Me in the Eye. Old Women, Aging and Ageism* (1984). A critique of society's attitude towards older women in general and the women's movement in particular is offered. These essays are the first to consider the added marginalisation that comes with being old and lesbian, thus, doubly 'othered':

> Again I was outside, again I was 'other'. Again I lived with the never-knowing when people would turn away from me, not because they had identified me as a lesbian, since I was no longer thought of as a sexual being, but because they had identified me as old.
>
> (Macdonald and Rich, 1984, p5)

The disappearance of the 'lesbian' under the category 'old' is of relevance here and relates to the construction of old age as asexual within a

heteronormative framework of beauty and desirability: 'For the mid-life woman, and especially the mid-life lesbian, sexual erasure is the most urgent and emotionally devastating aspect of ageism' (Copper, 1997, p130). Macdonald's experience of ageism within a women's group march constitutes one of the first accusations of ageism within the feminist movement itself: 'I am still angry at the ageism in the women's movement. I am angry at what it does to me and at what it must be doing to many other women of my age' (1984, pp35-36).

Key feminist theorists eventually turned to the issue of ageing. Greer's and Friedan's work can be seen as a feminist challenge to an ageing as decline paradigm. Germaine Greer focuses on the changes that occur with the menopause, and alternative role models for ageing women: 'If the world has dubbed you crone, you might as well be one' (1991, p8). Greer suggests that women welcome being unwanted as a return to the whole woman that they were before the sexual journey that started with puberty. Sexual redundancy, argues Greer, ends the subjection that women live in relation to men: 'To be unwanted is also to be free' (1991, p4).

In a similar attempt to challenge the paradigm of ageing as pathological, Betty Friedan proposes a more positive approach in *The Fountain of Age* (1993): 'I began my own search for answers, seeking out women and men who were breaking through conventional expectations of decline and deterioration in age – vital people over sixty-five' (p17).

The amount of vocabulary around age-stratification is in contrast to the sparse amount of 'critical writing on age and aging within feminism' as described by Basting:

The symbolic grandmothers of first wave feminists, the real grandmothers of both the much maligned silver age and their daughters of the second wave, and now the young upstarts of the third wave, toss about in this swirling sea of very different historical locations and very common goals.

(1998, p126)

Indeed, generational conflict pervades the metaphors and tropes used to describe ideological and political debates as Astrid Henry suggests (2004a). The progression through ages of feminist development or 'waves' has frequently been described along the lines of familial relations, as its recent use by Susan Faludi indicates (2010). When addressing the issue of ageism and the initial failure of feminist theories to engage in this type of discrimination, this feminist generational thinking emerges (Hogeland, 2001).

At the heart of this conflict lies a binary construction that opposes young and old as polar opposites. Wolf (1990, p14) hints at this conflict when referring to older women fearing younger women. Sontag's (1972) argument that women are old as soon as they are no longer young is an indication of a binary construction of the ageing process. Basting relates the antagonism between generations that seems to pervade Western culture to the anxiety around economic resources (1998, p84), claiming that '[p]otential connections across, and relations between age groups are made opaque by stereotypical, over-assertions of difference' (1998, pp86-87). To overcome this oppositional relation, Basting invites us 'to question how social constructions of age separate and divide women without either dismissing age differences as somehow imagined, or concretizing them as unalterable reality' (1998, p127). One way to counter the distancing between young and

old is the conceptualisation of the ageing process as in continuity, instead of in a binary construction.

A binary construction of ageing stimulates intergenerational conflict, by placing groups of women in opposition to each other, according to their chronological age. In turn, this forecloses the possibility of intergenerational communication or for considering ageing in terms of a continuum. As Woodward indicates, age 'is a subtle continuum, but we organize this continuum into "polar opposites"' (1991, p6). A similar point is made by Feldman and Poole who suggest that ageing 'must be viewed as a continuation of, not as a separation from, the earlier phases of life' (1999, p13). Elsewhere, Woodward elaborates on this idea, arguing that the discourse of age itself 'pivots on the blunt binary of young and old, as if there were only two states of age' (1999, p.xvii). Giles and Reid concur, stating that we see 'age in terms of discrete categories, when in reality there are a series of overlapping continua' (2005, p396).

Hagestad and Uhlenberg establish a nexus between age segregation and ageism (2005, p344), arguing that age segregation 'blocks essential opportunities for individuals to meet, interact, and move beyond "us versus them" distinctions' (2005, p349). In terms of cultural representation, this segregation is similarly mirrored in films representing lesbian women (as seen with *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, mentioned above).

A more flexible way of thinking about ageing is presented by Helene Moglen who introduces the idea of age identity as shifting configurations which go beyond specific time markers. The author defines ageing as 'a multiple, ambiguous, and contradictory process, which provides us –

continuously and simultaneously – with images of the past, present, lost, embodied, and imagined selves' (2008, pp303-304). Against a binary concept of age identity as a past (of youth) and a present (of old age), Moglen notes that these images 'comprise the discontinuous yet persistent thread of our identities, which are not integrated, which are not merely split, and which can neither be reduced to nor separated from the limitations and requirements of the body' (2008, p304).

Imperative connections between ageism and sexism, between gender and age have since been established within feminist theory (Browne, 1998; Calasanti and Slevin, 2006; Pearsall, 1997). It is now understood that:

> To uncover the relationships between aging and feminism, a feminist age framework must examine other forms of domination and exploitation for their connections with feminism and ageism. This includes the exploitation that exists between younger and older women.
> (Browne, 1998, p.xxviii)

In subsequent chapters, I will examine these binary oppositions which underlie the construction of the older woman as 'other'. The norm is the young, youthful body, against which the ageing body is positioned as *'other'*. The old lesbian brings an additional layer of otherness and, with few exceptions, is presented as *'other'* in relation to the young couple (and/or other heterosexual characters). A similar process of distancing old and young can be observed within cinematic representations of lesbian characters, where the old lesbian becomes the ageing 'other.'[24] Despite attempts to conceptualising ageing in connection to queer theory (Sandberg, 2008), contemporary cinema images (including independent productions) seem to replicate these oppositions. The following chapter will

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[24] For instance, *If these Walls Could Talk 2* and Itty Bitty Titty Committee.

return to this issue of queer theory as it is manifested in diverse concepts within film studies, such as the representation of the monstrous or the appropriation of transgressive queer characters. These concepts are revisited through an age studies perspective, revealing the possibilities and limitations of queer in relation to age categories.

So far I have established how ageism prevented the articulations of gender and age within feminist studies, leading to the marginalisation of older women as a subject of investigation but there is further work to be done in terms of a sustained analysis of sexual orientation and ageing.

Lesbian Feminist Contributions

Contributions from lesbian feminist authors to the topic of ageing and ageism were amongst the earliest to identify the added dimensions of discrimination – as a woman, a lesbian and elderly (Macdonald and Rich, 1984). When approaching the intersection of ageing and lesbian identities, the heteronormative content of most of the work developed within age studies becomes apparent. Lesbian feminist critique provides some points of entry to understanding the marginalisation of lesbian experiences as a subject, even within women's studies and feminist writings. Accusations of heterosexism either by omission or by design (Zimmerman, 1981b, p453), or of the invisibility of lesbian sexuality 'under the category of female sexuality' (Calhoun, 1995) have been directed at the disciplines of women's studies and feminism.

Wilton, for instance, argues that for 'lesbian studies there is no pre-existing academic base. Women's studies is dogged by heterosexism, gay

studies by sexism' (1995, p18). She adds that in order to surpass 'heteropolar feminism' the lesbian possibility has to be taken into account, '[u]nless lesbian-ness is always and everywhere recognised as a possibility, the apparatus of women's subordination remains invisible and unchallenged' (1995, p14). As far as research on women and ageing is concerned, Wilton's claim is confirmed by earlier research, such as Coyle's previously mentioned edited collection (1997) and Browne's (1998).

More recent studies, such as, Minichiello *et al.* (2005) on sexuality in later life, attends to differences in sexual orientation; as does the collection of feminist perspectives on age by Calasanti and Slevin (2006). Participant research, such as Adelman's (1986) or Claassen (2005) provides some insight into the lives of older lesbian women. Adelman recognises elements of continuity between lesbian and heterosexual women suggesting that 'the taboo against discussing aging and old age is just as strong in the lesbian community as it is in mainstream society (1986, p11) and thus the 'conditions of older lesbians are determined by the conditions of older women' (1986, pp11-12). But recognises elements of differentiation between lesbian and heterosexual ageing: 'what is unique about the aging process of lesbians is the stigma and discrimination we face' (p12). Similarly, Poor notes that an 'older lesbian experiences a kind of triple jeopardy – as a woman, as an older person, and as a lesbian' (1982, p171).

Poor's 'triple jeopardy' argument is reiterated in other research, as other authors emphasise the multiple forms of discrimination and oppression experienced by older lesbian women – referring to a triple invisibility (Kehoe, 1986), or triple shame (Schoonmaker, 1993) as sexism, ageism

and homophobia combine. Kehoe's work was an attempt to challenge the old lesbian's invisibility arguing that '[i]nvisible as a female, aging, and deviant, ignored by gerontologists, feminists, even sexologists dealing specifically with homosexuality, lesbians over 65 have been an unknown, mysterious minority' (1986, p139).

Opposed to the 'triple invisibility' argument around oppression, there is another strand of research on lesbian ageing that tends to focus on the potential for personal growth and change that comes with growing older. In line with a theory of successful ageing for older gay men and lesbians (Friend, 1991), its emphasis is on the advantages lesbians experience when growing old, suggesting that an alternative attitude towards ageing is possible when women distance themselves from heteronormative and patriarchal ideology (Adelman, 1986; Jay, 1995a; Kimmel and Sang, 2002; Rothblum *et al.*, 1995; Sang *et al.*, 1991b; Thompson *et al.*, 1999).[25]

Research in this area suggests that lesbians in midlife and old age have a more positive attitude towards ageing. Thompson *et al.* (1999), Kimmel and Sang (2002) and Jay (1995b) argue that lesbian women place less emphasis on youth and traditional standards of feminine beauty, since they 'tend to distance themselves from "mainstream beauty standards" as they age' (Thompson *et al.*, 1999, p44). Along the same line, Rothblum notes that 'lesbian communities may be more tolerant of diversity' (1995, p64). Similarly, it has been argued that a woman in a relationship with a woman is likely to lead a sexually fulfilling life into old age (Cole and Rothblum, 1991; Nestle, 1991; Rothblum *et al.*, 1995). Nestle reveals her personal

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[25] Different approaches to lesbian ageing depend on the age cohort analysed, whether *older* is used to describe over 40 or over 65, for instance. As mentioned, in the context of this thesis old age refers to 60 plus years of age.

experience of perceiving signs of age as erotic and the ageing woman as an experienced lover:

> As I have come to enjoy my own middle-aged sexual wisdom, I have also come to recognize it in other older women I see around me. Gray hair and textured hands are now erotic emblems I seek out.
>
> (1991, p182)

Contrary to these accounts of more accepting and less ageist lesbian communities, other authors confirm the existence of ageism within increasingly youth-oriented lesbian communities (Copper, 1997; Fullmer *et al.*, 1999; Poor, 1982). A bleak picture is described by Copper, who denounces ageism and generational conflict within her lesbian community:

> Above all else we are expected to be submissive to women younger than ourselves who are the "right" age to exert power within the lesbian world. We are asked to be walking contradictions to the cliches of lesbian identity which all of us are in the process of inventing. Unless old lesbians are re/membered as sexual, attractive, useful, integral parts of the woman-loving world, current lesbian identity is a temporary mirage, not a new social statement of female empowerment.
>
> (1997, p123)

Poor (1982) and Fullmer, Shenk and Eastland (1999) also explore the problematical invisibility of older lesbians within the lesbian community and the consequences for young and old lesbians alike. Poor laments the lack of visible role models for women over sixty that identify as lesbian:

> This unusual situation, where the elders of the lesbian community are for the most part hidden from us means that women between forty and sixty are considered the 'old' women in the community. And lesbians in their early fifties often feel they have no models for aging and that they are living on a kind of frontier.
>
> (1982, p166)

Fullmer *et al.* provide some context for this invisibility by stating that older lesbians felt 'alienated from the youth-oriented lesbian culture' (1999, p140),

and conclude that lesbians are 'clearly not immune to the influences of a sexist, ageist culture' (1999, p140).[26] In a similar tone, Copper concluded that '[l]esbian youth worship differs little from heterosexual youth worship' (1997, p131). Contemporary cultural representations of lesbians seem to confirm the latter tendency rather than providing a lesbian alternative. Indeed, as suggested in the introductory chapter, a postfeminist landscape of lesbian hypervisibility is constituted by youthful, glamorous, (hetero)sexualised lesbian characters. This type of representation reproduces/mirrors the traits of a heteronormative, youth-centred and ageist culture.

The two main concepts of ageing – ageing as decline and positive ageing – have produced their own associated cultural images. In what follows, I will consider specific research on media representation and determine to what extent an integrated approach of ageist and sexist imagery in previous studies can be productively connected to existing research in the area of gay and lesbian representation (further explored in Chapter Three). This research provides the background for an understanding of the older lesbian women portrayed in contemporary film texts. Due to the lack of substantial research on images of older lesbian women, I resort to the above, establishing the missing links between lesbian films studies and research on ageing.

This integrated approach to ageist and heterosexist imagery can be fruitful insofar as both categories – lesbian and old age – occupy a marginalised position in cultural representation, where their presence is

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[26] For further research on both arguments, firstly that lesbians are less influenced by conventional norms of attractiveness and that alternative appearance norms and standards prevail; and in contrast that lesbians are no less influenced by predominant beauty ideals see Milillo (2008).

essentially confirmed by stereotypical portrayals. Substantial research on either area – ageism within media representations and gays and lesbians in cinema – will allow me to build on these findings, establishing the necessary connections between age and sexuality, and thereby, contributing to these fields.

Representing Age/eing

Analysing the representation of gender, sexuality and ageing is essential within a cultural context embedded in visual imagery. As Dyer points out, representations 'have real consequences for real people, not just in the way they are treated [...] but in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society' (2002, p3). The interdependent relation between identity construction and representation can best be understood by Stuart Hall's 'cultural circuit' (1997). Hall argues that meanings are constructed, negotiated and renegotiated throughout this 'cultural circuit' in which identity formation is established:

> the question of meaning arises in relation to all the different moments or practices in our 'cultural circuit' – in the construction of identity and the making of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct.
>
> (1997, p4)

Hall's concept of a cultural circuit allows us to understand the continuousness of meaning production, as there is no starting point, rather a complex intersecting of culture and identity with cultural production and consumption.

The process of meaning production can, however, be interrupted by the consumer of these texts. Michel de Certeau made this clear in what became a seminal work on the appropriations of cultural texts: 'Far from being writers […] readers are travellers; they move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write' (1988, p174). Actively engaged audiences inscribe their own meanings into a film text that appears lacking in some respect – whether in terms of strong female characters, roles for women of colour, or lesbian storylines. These reading practices have been extensively theorised from the position of feminism (Arbuthnot and Seneca, 1990; Jermyn, 1996), lesbian and queer studies (Benshoff, 2004a; Dobinson and Young, 2000), black (lesbian) studies (Bobo, 2004; Nataf, 1995) or class (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978/1999). I shall return to this topic in the following chapter, in which I consider reading images of age 'against the grain,' a practice of appropriation which, in the past, has been youth-centred.

Across disciplines it is agreed that ageism is part of contemporary society and that ageist representations seem to be the norm (Cuddy *et al.*, 2005; Hummert *et al.*, 2004; Kite *et al.*, 2005). The main concern for most authors is that mainstream images of older women in film are both representative, and constitutive, of social concepts of age and society's attitude towards ageing (Rosselson, 2006; Stoddard, 1983; Walsh, 1989). The correlation between sexist and ageist assumptions in the cinematic representation of female characters has been well documented (see, for instance: Markson and Taylor, 2000); however, there has been no significant examination of how lesbian sexuality operates within these constructs. This is the point at

which my analysis will provide an original contribution as I focus on the representation of older lesbian women and establish links between ageist and heterosexist processes of erasure.

Research focused on older (television) audiences (Riggs, 1998; Robinson and Skill, 1995; Robinson *et al.*, 2004) reveals viewing patterns and reactions to screen portrayals. This research has shown that older viewers are concerned about the 'stereotypical roles and with the marginal place of older people' noted across the television landscape (Healey and Ross, 2002, p105). A study carried out by Donlon *et al.* seems to suggest there is a correspondence between greater television exposure and more negative images of ageing (2005). Specific studies on the experiences of older lesbian and gay viewers could not be found. I would nonetheless suggest that the absence of lesbian images of ageing is problematic as recognised by Poor's concern about the absence of role models for older lesbian women (1982).

The Older Heterosexual Woman in Film

One of the contexts for my analysis is the work that has been done on the older heterosexual woman in cinema (Markson, 2003; Markson and Taylor, 1993; Tally, 2006; 2008; Wearing, 2007). Contemporary cinema has come a long way since the older woman was exclusively represented as the 'good grandmother' or the 'meddlesome grandmother' (Stoddard, 1983, p108). Survey studies around the older woman in cinema do however reveal the existence of a biased gender representation (compared to male characters). Analyses of cinematic depictions of older men and women confirm the

prevalence of stereotypical depictions (Cohen-Shalev and Marcus, 2007; Fisher, 1992). When gender differences are contemplated, there is evidence of bias or a 'double jeopardy' in the representation of older female characters, usually represented according to stereotypical female roles (Bazzini, 1997; Lauzen and Dozier, 2005; Lincoln and Allen, 2004; Markson, 1997; Markson and Taylor, 1993; 2000; Whelehan, 2010).

A recent phenomena (already referred to in my introductory chapter), has been observed in a number of recent films in which the taboo of the bare flesh over 50 has been breached. *The Bangers Sisters* (Dolman, 2002), *Calendar Girls* (Cole, 2003) and *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003); or more recently, *Mamma Mia!* (Lloyd, 2008) and *It's Complicated* (Meyers, 2009) portray the middle-aged woman as re-discovering her body and sexuality and being empowered by this experience.[27] This is a refreshing approach to the ageing woman on screen. The fact that older women are now considered sexy seems to indicate that the concept of beauty (conventionally equated to youth) has been challenged and broadened in order to include more mature women. Nonetheless, as mentioned before, this kind of image can be seen as a different type of generalisation, one derived from the concept of positive ageing.

In effect, two concepts of ageing translate into two different paradigms of the older heterosexual woman in film. These two paradigms – one of the hypervisible sexualised ageing body ('older bird chick flick' genre) and the other continuing the narrative of decline with the 'ill and dying older woman' paradigm (Markson) – establish the paradox of hypervisibility/ invisibility of

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[27] The television equivalent would be, for instance, ABC's *Desperate Housewives* (2004-) and *Cougar Town* (2009-).

the heterosexual woman on screen. Woodward alludes to these complex configurations of hypervisibility/invisibility in the following:

> In our mass-mediated society, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops, conspiring to render the older female body paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible. It would seem that the wish of our visual culture is to erase the older female body from view. The logic of the disappearing female body would seem to be this: first we see it, then we don't.
>
> (2006, p163)

From *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Harold and Maude* (1971) to *Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont* (2005) or *About Schmidt* (2002) there seems to be a tendency for the older woman to *disappear*.

Elizabeth Markson's study of older women's images in film (2003) can be considered one of the most relevant contributions in this field, although addressing only heterosexual older women (which is understandable given the lack of lesbian images). Markson's and Taylor's analysis of ageing actresses and their award winning roles (1993) and their comparative analysis of gender differences in terms of available roles for men and women in American feature films (2000) is equally significant. These findings indicate that 'film roles have remained remarkably static in age and gender stereotyping' (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p137). In confirmation of the existence of age-appropriate norms, Markson and Taylor found that older actresses are limited to fewer roles and to a 'narrower range of behaviours considered cinematically for ageing women' (2000, p157).

Markson's analysis presents, alongside the clothed body and the sexual older body, the model of the 'disintegrating ill or dying female body' (2003, p95) as models of representability of the ageing female body. Elsewhere, the authors concluded, 'the vast majority of older women in films project

images of decline' (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p156). As exception to this prevalence, the past decade saw the rise of the older woman as 'sexy oldie,' an image aligned with the idea of a successfully aged and sexually active female body. Recent research analysing the meanings ascribed to this 'new' type of screen representation will be considered later (Wearing, 2009; Whelehan, 2010; Woodward, 2006).

The image of the ill or dying woman is, however, relevant once the intersection with images of lesbian sexuality reveals a tendency for images and narratives of decline for older lesbian characters. In the following chapter, I explore traditional modes of representing lesbian characters, to illustrate that the old lesbian woman emerges within a framework of the ghostly lesbian, who can easily be 'killed off'. For now, I place Markson's findings in the wider context of representing illness, dying and death as a mechanism of constructing *the 'other'*.

Death of the 'Other'

Norbert Elias proposed that the thought of death can be avoided by 'pushing it as far from ourselves as possible – by hiding and repressing the unwelcome idea – or by holding an unshakable belief in our own personal immortality – "others die, I do not"' (1985, p1). In terms of representation this translates into an association between death and the *'other'*, enabling the viewer to repress or displace their own age and death anxiety. Several authors have suggested that the death of the *'other'* is essential for the negotiation of suffering and the fear of dying, since it enables the viewing

subject to create distance between the ill or dying subject and herself. As Hallam *et al.* suggest,

> witnessing or experiencing the body in decline through death or decay forms a potent reminder of frailty, vulnerability and mortality. The passage of time and the inevitability of physical transformation become powerfully evident. They provoke anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction.
>
> (1999, p21)

According to Elisabeth Bronfen, the depiction of death in art, or rather, of the dead female body, has long been a traditional method of confronting death through 'the death of the other' (1993, p.x). Bronfen suggests that 'representations of death in art are so pleasing, it seems, because they occur in a realm clearly delineated as not life, or not real' (1993, p.x). Through the visual representation we are able to confront and 'repress our knowledge of the reality of death precisely because here death occurs *at* someone else's body and *as* an image' (1993, p.x).[28]

Seeing that *woman* already occupies the position of the *'other'* within the structures of patriarchy (that establish masculinity as the universal, the norm), the 'threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation [...] appeasing the threat of real mortality, of sexual insufficiency, of lack of plenitude and wholeness' (Bronfen, 1993, p.xii). In cinema, the mechanism of 'killing-off' has been thus defined as an assertion of hetero-patriarchal control in response to the threat of otherness (Doane, 1991; Markson, 2003; Weiss, 1992). The death of the threatening lesbian or *femme fatale* can thus be seen as punishment for gender/sexuality transgression. This otherness can take different forms. The figure of the

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[28] Italics in original.

older woman, for instance, combines the categories of age and gender otherness. Another form of otherness and a type of threat is constituted by the sexual *'other'*. The death of lesbian and gay characters is of particular relevance in this context (Cottingham, 1996; Creed, 2003; Fullagar, 2001, p393; Russo, 1987) and I will return to this issue in the following chapter.

As Markson correctly deduces, the paradigm of the 'disintegrating ill or dying female body' (2003, p95) is determined by an universal fear of death (Elias, 1985; Hallam *et al.*, 1999). With this specific function of creating a distance between the idea of death and finitude, the ageing female character is soon made to disappear (Markson, 2003, p93). In his study of death-bed scenes and ailment narratives, Mark Gallagher similarly recognises that in popular cinema older women are defined 'in terms of frailty, immobility, and powerlessness, death is often connotatively linked to femininity' (2009, pp214-215). Gallagher is focusing on mainstream action blockbusters, such as *Spiderman* (Raimi, 2002), *Superman Returns* (Singer, 2006), *Miami Vice* (Mann, 2006) and *Collateral* (Mann, 2004), films in which a hospital or a death-bed scene (with a bed-ridden older woman) catalyse narrative action (2009).

The logic of the disappearing body is closely linked to the cultural representation of death. Coming back to Woodward's argument, these images of disease and death correspond to the disappearing, invisible ageing body: contemporary culture 'erase[s] the older body from view [...] first we see it, then we don't' (2006, p163). In a context dominated by visual culture, erasure denies a sense of belonging to whoever is erased. The

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disappearing element (individual, identity) becomes *'other'* through this disappearing act.

The associations between old age, the biological decline of our body, and the inescapable finitude of human life are obvious (Martens *et al.*, 2005; Woodward, 1999, pp18-19). The reiteration of storylines of illness and death, however, reinforces a limiting and negative set of meanings that surround women and old age. The ageing older woman becomes the *'other'*. And just as the ghostly is more easily dismissed as non-existent, by defining someone as the *'other'*, they can easily disappear. In Chapter Four, I will link these arguments to the cultural construction of the lesbian as ghosted (Castle, 1993). This is a key concept within lesbian studies and, by intersecting it with the paradigm of the disappearing ageing body, I offer a fresh formulation of Castle's arguments.

The 'Older Bird Chick Flick' Paradigm

As mentioned above, the desiring and desirable older woman in cinema is a recent phenomenon. Borrowing from Swartz and Tally, who attributed the labels 'middle-aged chick flick' (Swartz, 2004) and 'older bird chick flick' (Tally, 2006; 2008) to these films, I identify this mode of representability as 'older bird chick flick' paradigm. While adopting these labels, I do however recognise that the use of *chick* and *flick* is problematic (see, for instance: Ferriss and Young, 2008; Garrett, 2007). Juxtaposing this label with 'older bird' further emphasises the paradoxes of a postfeminist cultural context which values youthful femininity (chick is one of the manifestations of this

'girling' of adult women) and embraces hypersexualised images.[29] With regards to the 'girling' of femininity, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra argue that this trend is itself evident

> in both the celebration of the younger woman as a marker of postfeminist liberation and the continuing tendency to either explicitly term or simply treat women of a variety of ages as girls. To some extent, girlhood is imagined within postfeminist culture as being for everyone [...].
>
> (2007b, p18)

The combination of 'older' with 'chick' is therefore representative of the ambivalence around the images of ageing and sexuality in youth-centred postfeminist culture, and this genre contains some contradictions deriving from the demands for postfeminist youthfulness (see Tally, 2006; 2008; Wearing, 2007). Hence, the sexualisation of old age, as Gott argues, is actually an extension of middle age into more advanced chronological age, 'it is not old age that is being sexualized, but rather an extended middle age' (2005, p2). In other words, the ageing body is acceptable as long as the marks of age are 'successfully' surpassed or repressed.

It has been argued that films portraying the ageing female body as sexual contain mixed messages (Tally, 2008; Wearing, 2007). Wearing explains of *Something's Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003): 'while offering a rare challenge to the centrality of youth in romantic narratives […] [it] deploys a mixture of hostility and celebratory imagery to investigate the sexuality of those over fifty' (2007, p305). Thus, the marks of the ageing body are erased through what Wearing describes as the 'feminization' of the problematically 'androgynous' body (2007, pp297-298):

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[29] In addition to 'older bird' and 'sexy oldie' there are various other expressions connoting the sexualisation of female bodies previously not seen first and foremost in sexual terms, such as the mother – 'yummy mummy' and MILF ('Mum I'd Like to Fuck') – and grandmother GMILF ('Grandmother I'd Like to Fuck').

it is femininity that is invoked as a weapon in the battle against age [...] This "work" is literally to install the missing "femininity"; the "new look" is all about clothes that are fitted and "feminine."

(Wearing, 2007, p296)

Needless to say, that this is a heteronormative version of femininity. The aged/androgynous body is unacceptable within these postfeminist texts and reinscribes the equation of beauty and youth within an apparently more inclusive cultural context. Furthermore, heteronormative femininity being part of the condition of contemporary representability complicates, at once, the visibility and entrance into the mainstream of the ageing lesbian body.

The coupling within these narratives is age-appropriate and heteronormative (Tally, 2006; 2008; Wearing, 2007). Acknowledging that the display of the ageing body and the association of ageing and sexuality is polemic, these films contain these potentially transgressive representations within the norms of age appropriate coupling, and the context of the heterosexual family unit. Tally adds,

Although the more upbeat 'older bird' films such as *Something's Gotta Give* would appear to present a more positive view of older women expressing their sexuality, both kinds of films share a central theme: that an 'older' woman who is sexually alive and aware and has her own needs must nevertheless be contained within the family. [...] while seemingly affirmative, also express a sense of ambivalence about older women's sexuality.

(2008, p120)[30]

As I will develop further in the following chapter, the older lesbian is, therefore, doubly excluded from a postfeminist cultural context which 'absolutely rejects lesbianism in all but its most guy-friendly forms, that is,

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[30] The other film Tally is referring to is *The Banger Sisters* (Dolman, 2002).

divested of potentially feminist associations and invested with sexualized glamour' (Tasker and Negra, 2007b, p21).

This is the ambivalence of the 'sexy oldie' image that can be considered as a formulation deriving from 'successful ageing' discourse. While the assumption that older women are asexual is, of course, ageist, 'the reversal of this association will not necessarily be liberating if narrow sexist (and heterosexist) sexual stereotypes are reasserted in the process' (Marshall, 2006, p350). The limits imposed by the postfeminist framework in which these films operate revolve around traditional sexist (and heterosexist) principles which actually establish the limits of visibility and acceptability of the ageing female body.

The postfeminist framework illustrates the limitations of a positive identification with the identity 'old'. In order to be culturally visible a transformation is required – the markers of age, of masculinity or androgyny are erased. The condition for entrance into the mainstream is a compulsory 'feminisation' (according to heteronormative standards of beauty).

Conclusion

In this chapter I surveyed the issue of ageing, gender and sexuality across several disciplines, concluding the predominance of ageing studies within the health and social care disciplines. Emerging research on women and ageing, essentially within a feminist context, has shown that there exists a 'double standard' of ageing. Specific studies on male and female characters on screen provide evidence of a gender-biased representation (in addition

to ageist limitations). I concluded that the older lesbian as image is an under-researched theme both in age studies and in lesbian studies.

By furthering existing studies, I will establish some of the missing connections between the main concepts within ageing studies (addressed at the beginning of this chapter) and lesbian film studies. One of the links emerging from this survey of literature is the problematic of positive images – in both, representations of ageing and, as I will explore in the following chapter, of lesbian characters. While the images of 'positive' ageing produce another type of ageist generalisation, a consideration of what constitutes a 'positive' image of lesbian ageing is long overdue. I mentioned the existing paradox between the meaning of asexuality evoked by the identity old and the suggestion of a sexual identity with the concept lesbian. I addressed the main research regarding the representation of older heterosexual women in film. Markson's work on older female characters in cinema (2003) provides one of the basis for my argument regarding the problematic reiteration of the death motif. As becomes evident in my analysis of disease and death, these themes become the means through which the older lesbian is 'othered'. I link this idea with one of the key concepts within lesbian studies – Castle's apparitional/ghosted lesbian (1993) – in order to explore the ghosting of older lesbian characters.

At the end of this chapter I considered one of the main forms the cinematic representability of the older heterosexual woman takes – through the image of the 'sexy oldie' within recent mainstream romantic comedy. A feminist critique of postfeminist cultural representations allows the link between this form of visibility and that of the lesbian. Research in lesbian

studies provides the concepts I draw on in establishing the limits of older lesbian representability. Within postfeminist mainstream representations the older heterosexual woman is representable as long as appearing youthful and feminine. Lesbian representability is likewise confined to certain forms of visibility. Recent research identified the contemporary paradigm of lesbian representability in terms of the young, slim, feminine, (hetero)sexualised 'chic' lesbian of postfeminist culture. Either paradigm limits cultural visibility and excludes images of older lesbian women (by reason of age and/or unfeminine appearance) except in specific variations as analysed in this thesis. Analysing older lesbian characters in contemporary mainstream film will reveal the limitations imposed by the 'sexy oldie' and/ or 'chic' lesbian paradigms. In the next chapter I revisit earlier theoretical moments in the history of lesbian and gay cinema representation in order to articulate the concept of invisibility and absence.

Chapter Three

Age, Sexuality and Representation

Introduction

In the previous chapter I considered existing research in the area of age studies, locating lacunae in connections between age, gender, and sexuality, thus establishing the point of my contribution. I ended with a survey of literature concerning postfeminism and the cultural representations it allows in terms of ageing female bodies.

In the present chapter I extend the critique directed at postfeminist cultural forms to the limitations and possibilities of representing the lesbian. Extensive work has been done in this area of lesbian scholarship, both in terms of television and cinema (Ciasullo, 2001; Hamer and Budge, 1994; Jay, 1995b; Tasker and Negra, 2007b). More work needs to be done, however, in terms of considering how age as an identity category intersects with available images and how the absence and/or invisibility of the older lesbian woman is constructed. I will proceed with a survey of literature that has informed and advanced my research into the complexities of older lesbians on screen.

The recent proliferation of the ageing heterosexual woman within the 'older bird chick flick' genre establishes the boundaries of acceptable representations of the ageing body within a postfeminist cultural framework.[31] This debate around postfeminist cultural representations compellingly shows that visibility comes at a price and contains ambivalent, contradictory messages (see:Brooks, 1997; Holmlund, 2005; Tasker and Negra, 2005; 2007a; Walters, 1995). Similarly, contemporary young lesbian

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[31] The British film *The Mother* (Michell, 2003), for instance, cannot be placed under this new postfeminist label of the 'older bird chick flick'. By portraying the older female character in an extra-marital, non-monogamous relationship it challenges the formula of acceptable ageing femininity established by mainstream romantic comedies.

characters reveal more about the sexualisation of female representation and the limits imposed by a postfeminist cultural framework than about the diversity of lesbian identities.

As most scholars agree, a shift from invisibility or stereotypical representations to more diverse images of gays and lesbians across mainstream media occurred during the 1990s (Creekmur and Doty, 1995b; Dean, 2007; Gamson, 2002; Gever *et al.*, 1993; Hamer and Budge, 1994; Wilton, 1994a). In my introductory chapter, I referred to (television) landmarks of this new visibility, *Ellen* and *The L Word* as two key examples. In what follows, I argue that the contemporary paradigm of postfeminist lesbian *chic* excludes the possibility of the old lesbian body. Research in the area of lesbian and gay media images suggests that these 'positive' images and this 'new' visibility present certain limitations and create new exclusions. Through an ageing lens, these exclusions can be understood as deriving from underlying ageist principles that extend to lesbian and gay representation as well. Thus arises the hypervisibility paradox of lesbian representation – the hypervisible 'chic' lesbian image coexists with the absence of the older lesbian.

Indeed I will argue in subsequent chapters that images, which combine old age and lesbian sexuality, fall outside of the 'new' modes of representing the older woman in film (the 'older bird chick flick') or the younger lesbian (the 'chic' lesbian). When the older lesbian appears, this image can be best understood within the context of earlier paradigms of lesbian representability (pre-new visibility). Revisiting scholarship in the field

of gay and lesbian film, I explore how these paradigms evolve when intersecting with modes of representing ageing and the ageing body.

Postfeminism and Lesbian 'Chic'

Although an increasing number of lesbian/gay films emerged among the independent film festival circuit during the 1980s, as Dyer recalls (2003, p2), the emergence of visibly gay characters into the realms of popular culture occurred the following decade. In 1995, Karla Jay claimed that '[a]ccording to the media, lesbians have arrived' (1995b, p1). Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge identified 'lesbianism's new acceptability' (1994, p11) and the rise of lesbian chic (1994, p4). The proliferation of lesbian images continued throughout the current decade. Tricia Jenkins notes that, in the last few years, 'lesbian sexuality has become more explicitly manifest in mainstream film' (2005, p491). Similarly, Sue Jackson and Tamsyn Gilbertson observed '[o]ver the last decade, lesbian visibility in the media has mushroomed' and the 'new' lesbian woman has emerged (2009, p199). This 'new,' acceptable lesbian is made acceptable 'via the femme body' (Ciasullo, 2001, p578) – she is feminine, fashionably dressed (i.e. not masculine) and sexualised or androgynously trendy (but not butch).

As most authors would agree, attaining a visible presence within cultural representation carries undeniable advantages, in particular for a formerly marginalised and pathologised identity. From an identity politics approach, a visible presence, preferably a 'positive' representation is seen as an advantage, as Martha Gever suggests (2003). Visibility in mainstream culture, mainly through 'images of lesbians whose lives are not scandalous,

apart from their lovers' gender' (2003, p21) challenges notions of lesbianism as psychosexual pathology. Gever continues,

> Such "positive images" [...] offer role models for young women who are unable or unwilling to conform to heterosexual norms but find no affirmation for their lesbian identities and same-sex desires, suffering from self-destructive emotional disorders as a result.
>
> (2003, p21)

Other authors have taken a more critical stance towards the celebration of 'positive' images (Becker *et al.*, 1995; Holmlund, 2002; Waldman, 1990). Becker *et al.* have identified a need for films 'that deal with variation, complex identities, and contradiction – all outside the scope of the "positive image" approach. Lesbian films cannot be considered outside the context of the lesbian community' (1995, p36). Holmlund emphasises the limitations of 'positive' images, noting that 'positive' images 'are not positive for everyone, and "truth" is very much in the eye of the beholder' (2002, p88). The 'lesbian baby-boom' (Warn, 2003) in popular culture can here be mentioned as an example of a controversial 'positive' image. The repetition of the lesbian pregnancy storyline is considered by some authors delimiting and provides an acceptable, domesticated image of a lesbian (Bendix, 2011; Warn, 2003; 2006). This kind of normalisation has led authors to consider if this new visibility is a cause for celebration (Gamson, 2002; Walters, 2003).

Most contemporary lesbian images have more in common with postfeminist images of heterosexual characters than with what would be considered the representation of lesbians. Within the discourse and imagery of popular postfeminist culture,[32] lesbian and heterosexual women are

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[32] I am referring to cultural texts characteristic of this discourse of postfeminism. It is important at this point to distinguish between the popular culture accounts of postfeminist discourses and a postfeminism framed within the feminist academic community. As Ann Brooks points out: 'Postfeminism as understood from this perspective is

represented according to the same principles – traditional feminine appearance, consumer-oriented life-style, sexualised femininity. Susan McKenna notes that the 'current status of lesbian visibility in popular culture – often designated as *lesbian chic* – is marked by an intersection with the discourses of contemporary postfeminist' (2002, p285).

Tasker and Negra argue that postfeminism 'draws on and sustains an invented social memory of feminist language as inevitable shrill, bellicose, and parsimonious' and portrays feminism 'as an unwelcome, implicitly censorious presence' (2007b, p3). Similarly, lesbianism's acceptability, as Hamer and Budge argue, 'has been a result of lesbian-feminist political struggles' (1994, p11) but ironically its 'entrée into the mainstream has been at the expense of a politicized version of lesbian identity' (p11). Just as postfeminist discourses suggest that the very success of feminism (in the past) 'produces its irrelevance for contemporary culture' (Tasker and Negra, 2007b, p8), lesbian-feminist achievements are acknowledged – the acceptability of lesbianism in the mainstream itself is an indication of these achievements – only to be disavowed as irrelevant, outdated and *un*-chic. The concept of (lesbian-) feminist concerns as obsolete is central to the bad lesbian/good lesbian dichotomy identified by Hamer and Budge – 'the bad political lesbian who was anti-men, anti-sex and anti-fashion' (1994, p11) contrasting with the 'good' 'new brand' of 1990s lesbian, who is 'gorgeous, glamorous and, like any other good fashion accessory, devoid of any political meaning' (p11).

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about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticisation of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda' (1997, p4).

McKenna recognises this good/bad lesbian dichotomy in the interrelationship of lesbian chic and postfeminism, noting that these two concepts:

> are typically framed in similar ways by critics who decry an equality that hinges on a sexualized appearance constructed through consumer ideals and an erasure of difference; this equality – which is argued to be comprised – is sustained through a depoliticizing individualism.
>
> (2002, p286)

Tasker and Negra note postfeminism's rejection of lesbianism except in 'its most guy-friendly forms, that is, divested of potentially feminist associations and invested with sexualized glamour' (2007b, p21). Images of lesbian chic have been 'cleansed' of any traces of lesbian-feminism, and what is left is a chic, sexy, 'hot' lesbian (Gill, 2009; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009), who has been 'heterosexualized or "straightened out"' (Ciasullo, 2001, p578).

Ann Ciasullo formulates these questions in relation to mainstream culture in general 'what kind of lesbian has been *allowed* to appear on mainstream cultural landscapes? How is she (re)presented, […] how is she embodied – how is her body portrayed, described, contained or not?' (2001, p578).[33] Hence, the visible, mainstream lesbian body:

> is at once sexualized and desexualized: on the one hand, she is made into an object of desire for straight audiences through her heterosexualization, a process achieved by representing the lesbian as embodying hegemonic femininity and thus, for mainstream audiences, as looking 'just like' conventionally attractive straight women; on the other hand, because the representation of desire between two women is usually suppressed in these images, she is de-homosexualized.
>
> (Ciasullo, 2001, p578)

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[33] Italics in original.

This *de*-sexualisation, or rather de-*homo*sexualisation, simultaneously suppresses most cultures' most visible lesbian identity formation – the butch (Halberstam, 1998; Munt, 2001). In terms of mainstream visibility the butch 'remains in the margins, rarely seen [...]. Perhaps most obviously because the butch, unlike the femme, is not consumable; her relative invisibility on the cultural landscape has to do with her perceived (un)attractiveness' (Ciasullo, 2001, p600). Consequently, in the 'same moment that mainstream culture (re)presents the lesbian, challenging her long-standing invisibility, it reinscribes that very invisibility' (Ciasullo, 2001, p600) by excluding such a potent signifier of lesbian existence and desire – the butch. Arguing along the same lines, Sherrie Inness remarks upon the exclusion of the butch even from films targeted at a lesbian audience:

> Butches fail to fulfill heterosexual ideas about what is attractive and sexually appealing in women, and therefore, at least up to the present, massmarket lesbian films have been carefully crafted to include lesbians who could be as desirable to heterosexuals as to homosexuals.
> (1997, p200)

At the same time, similarly sexualised and conventionally attractive heterosexual characters are presented as sexually fluid, bi-curious and willing to experiment with same-sex sexuality (Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009; Jenkins, 2005). As McKenna notes in her analysis of the television series *Ally McBeal* (1997-2002), lesbianism is 'presented as a temporary adventure for the decidedly heterosexual characters' (2002, p291). The good/bad lesbian dichotomy can thus be seen as operating within postfeminist representations of lesbian chic, in which the 'good' lesbian includes lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women (temporarily experimenting with same-sex sexuality) as long as they are glamorous,

conventionally attractive, feminine, and depoliticised. In opposition, the 'bad' lesbian, although an image of the past, occasionally becomes visible through characters who are presented through lesbian stereotypes, coded as lesbian-feminists, masculinised, or coded as butch, framed as unattractive and un-chic. As opposed to 'chic' lesbians, 'real lesbians' have a specific representational paradigm: 'the presentational codes of her un-chicness become associated with the interactional codes of her feminist politics. [...] not only is she the un-chic incarnate, but she is the permanent lesbian' (McKenna, 2002, p296). The 'permanent' lesbian is coded through her butchness, or her lesbian-feminist politics. An example for the first instance can be found in the television sit-com *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), where the un-chic, 'permanent' lesbian is parodied through, for instance, the butch UPS delivery driver. An illustration of a lesbian character defined through her consistent lesbian-feminist discourse can be found in television drama *Nip/Tuck*'s (2003-2010) anaesthesiologist Liz Cruz (Roma Maffia).

The good lesbian/ bad lesbian dichotomy is valuable for an articulation of other differences that similarly align themselves with the 'bad' lesbian image. The same principle applies to the exclusion /suppression of older lesbians from mainstream representation. According to heteronormative ideals of beauty and attractiveness, youth is valued, age is not, and the ageing body is constructed as undesirable. The paradox of hypervisibility/invisibility can thus be applied to a lesbian context where images of youthful, sexualised bodies become hypervisible while more diverse images of lesbian identities remain invisible.

By establishing a parallel with other erased differences, such as butch identities, the erasure of age/ing can be situated within this larger dynamic of cultural invisibilities. As noted by Jay in the following passage, there is a multiplicity of absent lesbian images:

> Lipstick lesbians, business executives, and movie stars may be all the rage, but where are the granola dykes, lesbian separatists, waitresses and construction workers, fat dykes, old lesbians, lesbian adolescents, butches, disabled lesbians? Where are the lesbians who look like your grandmother, who may in fact be your grandmother?
> (1995b, pp1-2)

The invisibility of old age and the ageing body within contemporary mainstream culture can be explained by hegemonic cultural conventions which limit lesbian visibility to one acceptable version within postfeminist discourse – one which conforms to the demands and conventions of heteronormative ideals of beauty: slim, feminine and usually white, middle-class and able-bodied (see also: Farr and Degroult, 2008; Gill, 2009; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009). Indeed, since the hypervisible postfeminist version of the lesbian renders androgynous, masculine and ageing bodies *un*representable, the older lesbian is prevented from entering visibility by way of several mechanisms of erasure – ageism, sexism, heteronormativity. Much like the butch, the older lesbian will necessarily be positioned as the 'bad' lesbian, perceived as unattractive and *un*consumable within a youth-centred, consumer-oriented culture. Holmlund remarks, '"chick" postfeminists are generally young; a few are middle-aged; none seem old (Botox helps)' (2005, p116). So are *chic* lesbians.

Theory around postfeminist cultural representation of lesbian sexuality and its erasure of age will be drawn on throughout this thesis in order to

open up an understanding of the dichotomy between past and present, between old and young that establish the old lesbian as *'other'*. While contemporary research on lesbian representation relies on the existence and abundance of images within contemporary postfeminist texts (Farr and Degroult, 2008; Gill, 2009; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009; Jenkins, 2005; McKenna, 2002), previous studies on gay and lesbian in film have provided more suitable concepts for a theorisation of absences and disappearances. The concept of invisibility and the ghostly, the concept of the lesbian as predatory and monstrous and of lesbian desire as abject is well documented among literature on lesbians in film. In order to account for these concepts in articulation with older lesbians on screen, I revisit these theoretical moments through an age lens.

Lesbians and Film

Scholars who present a history of the representation of homosexuality in cinema or the history of queer film (Benshoff and Griffin, 2006; Dyer, 1980; Dyer and Pidduck, 2003; Russo, 1987) have provided insight into the modes of gay in/visibility throughout the decades. In the 1980s, Vito Russo noted that 'visibility has never really been an issue in the movies. Gays have always been visible. It is *how* they have been visible that has remained offensive for almost a century' (1987, p325).[34] In a similar tone, Caroline Sheldon expresses the concern about the alternative to the absence of lesbian images: '[u]nfortunately when lesbians do appear the effect is far more negative than their simple absence. Lesbianism is usually

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[34] Italics in original.

shown as an aberration, an individual psycho-social problem' (1980, p5). While this assertion no longer rings true for contemporary lesbian representation, provided these lesbian or bisexual characters are young/er; when a lesbian identity is assumed by someone over fifty, the effect resembles earlier stereotypical descriptions, such as Sheldon's (1980, p5).

Throughout the 1990s research on lesbian representation similarly maintains that lesbianism in cinema can be characterised by 'invisibility, erasure, repression' (Weiss, 1992, p52) and 'absence' (Whatling, 1997, p13) or through (negative) stereotypes (Becker *et al.*, 1995, p26; Weiss, 1992, p1; Wilton, 1994a, p2). Andrea Weiss provides a comprehensive account of lesbian images in cinema across several decades until the late 1980s. In her introduction, Weiss maintains that:

> Lesbian images in the cinema have been and continue to be virtually invisible. Hollywood cinema, especially, needs to repress lesbianism in order to give free rein to its endless variations on heterosexual romance. Each lesbian image that has managed to surface – the lesbian vampire, the sadistic or neurotic repressed woman, the pre-Oedipal 'mother/daughter' lesbian relationship, the lesbian as sexual challenge or titillation to men – has helped determine the boundaries of possible representation, and has insured the invisibility of many other kinds of lesbian images.
>
> (1992, p1)

The erasure of lesbians and lesbian desire from history has been extensively documented (see: Gross, 2001; Smith, 1995a; Wahl, 1999, pp60-62; Wilton, 1994a; 1995). It is a kind of truism that 'lesbian oppression is preeminently marked by invisibility,' Wilton argues (1994b, p2) which 'is a somewhat potent problematic in the context of the moving image' (1994b, p2). In order to conceptualise the co-existence of invisibility of the older lesbian alongside the hypervisibility of the postfeminist chic lesbian, ageism

needs to be recognised as part of what Wilton names 'mechanisms of lesbian erasure' (1995, p60).

As opposed to the lack of positive images these studies suggest that there is an abundance of 'negative' images or stereotypes:

> Lesbians are nearly invisible in mainstream cinematic history, except as evil or negative-example characters. There is the lesbian as villainess [...]. There is the lesbian as vampire, both metaphorically [...] and quite literally, as in the genre of lesbian vampire movies. There is the brutal bull dyke […].
>
> (Becker *et al*., 1995, p26)

The idea of the lesbian as predator, evil and unnatural combine to form one of the most frequent representations of lesbianism in cinema: the vampire (Hanson, 1999; Weiss, 1992; Zimmerman, 1981a). For Barbara Creed, the lesbian vampire presents one of the forms of the monstrous feminine, combining two layers of abjection (1993).

These studies suggest that before the new, chic lesbian image, two categories of lesbian representability predominated – the invisibility paradigm and the lesbian as monstrous – establishing the absence or stereotypical presence within the cultural landscape. Research in this area has considered both paradigms without ever exploring the relevance of age and the ageing body. These theories, although lacking in this respect, provide the basis for an analysis of the older lesbian character presented as disappearing or as monstrous presence. In connecting these theories with the logic of the disappearing body (Woodward, 2006) and paradigms of representing the older heterosexual woman in film (Markson, 2003; Markson and Taylor, 1993), I establish missing links between existing research in order to advance my own arguments in the following chapters.

Previous research (Babuscio, 1980; Dyer, 1980; Fullmer *et al.*, 1999; Hankin, 1998; Sheldon, 1980) about ageing and lesbian identity in film addresses the 1968 film *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich).[35] Usually referred to as an illustration of lesbian stereotyping – containing both the 'mannish lesbian' and the infantilised *femme* (Hankin, 1998; Sheldon, 1980) – or of lesbian camp (Babuscio, 1980; Dyer, 1980), some work around this film has explored the question of ageing. Fullmer *et al.* briefly note how the notions of old and useless are linked in the representation of George (Beryl Reid), the older woman in a relationship with a younger woman, who 'ends up' old, lonely and desperate (1999, pp138-139). Jodi Brooks analyses *The Killing of Sister George* in line with other films that portray the ageing actress in crisis (1999).

In 2006, one reviewer of *Notes on a Scandal* associates both films (*The Killing of Sister George* and *Notes on a Scandal*) on the basis of the narrative outcome for the older protagonist (Torrance, 2007). This is something I also explore in relation to *Notes on a Scandal* later in this thesis. This is not only an indication of the types of preconception that *Notes on a Scandal* revives, more importantly, it indicates that between 1968 and 2006 no significant representation of an older lesbian woman surfaced to substitute George.

In recent representations, the intersection of the identity *old* with the identity *lesbian* has resulted either in an increased invisibility or in a magnified monstrosity. Lesbian stereotypes are stealthily revived through their association with ageist stereotypes, which appear *more* socially

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[35] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.

acceptable, generally encountering less opposition. In the first instance, images 'disappear' on account of 'the logic of the disappearing female body' (Woodward, 2006, p163) or the tragic lesbian death storyline (Russo, 1987) that revisits a well established theory of vanishing and invisible bodies within lesbian studies (Berenstein, 1998; Carroll, 2007; Carroll, 2008; Castle, 1993; Hoogland, 1997; McLeod, 2001; Whitt, 2005). The frailty and vulnerability of the ageing body is superimposed, the body in decline prevails while the lesbian identity becomes secondary (in confirmation of both the ageing as decline concept and the idea of asexual old age).

In the second instance, when lesbian desire is embodied by an ageing body at the centre of the narrative (as protagonist), several layers of abjection and otherness converge. Cultural meanings of the lesbian as monstrous/abject other intersect with the construction of the ageing 'other', the ageing body as abject – the older lesbian woman becomes monstrous. These negative images can always be approached from a queer theory position that values transgressive images of non-normative sexualities. Therefore, research in this area will be considered later in this chapter.

Identity Politics and the 'Positive' Images Debate
Images of illness, dying and death, or of the lesbian as monstrous, become problematic within an identity politics based, positive image-seeking perspective on lesbian and gay representation. An identity politics based search for 'positive' images is concerned with the representation of a particular group of people or an identity (e.g. ethnic, sexual or age identity) deemed under- or mis-represented.

I already mentioned that the debate around positive images dates back to the women's movement and a perceived need to challenge the predominant 'negative' representation of women in film (Artel and Wengraf, 1990; Waldman, 1990). The debate around 'positive' images became central to feminist film criticism. Feminist film critics lamented the lack of positive role models and condemned existing images of women, considered limiting and reactionary:

> an endlessly expanding category of neurotics, murderers, *femmes fatales*, vamps, punks, misfits, and free-floating loonies whose very existence was an affront, not only to the old, sexist definitions of pliant women (or even categorizable psychotics), but also to the upbeat rhetoric of the women's movement.
>
> (Haskell, 1987, p373)

According to this perspective stereotypes are a 'negative' thing, while 'positive' and inspiring images are seen to be beneficial in terms of an affirmative identity politics. The issue of (lesbian) representation is of particular concern in a cultural context which presumes 'heterosexuality as the biological, psychological, and moral standard' (Phelan, 1989, p50). The 'positive' images approach has been criticised; some limitations being 'that positive images, like negative images, suppress contradiction and are thus static' (Becker *et al.*, 1995, p27). We must be aware of the contradictory nature of images in our culture, as Suzanna Walters suggests '[i]t is too simplistic to state that there are "bad" images that produce "bad" attitudes and behaviors' (1995, pp2-3).

The notion of positive images is similarly associated with the identity politics of the gay liberation movement in its attempt to create a sense of a distinct gay identity. Jagose refers to this sense of identity as being based

on pride in being gay, it 'is precisely this that "new sense of identity" – and indeed that "pride" – which became problematic in queer theory' (1996, p32). According to the positive images perspective, 'the answer to the oppressive negative stereotypes of mainstream cinema was to produce positive images of lesbians and gays instead' (Stacey and Street, 2007, p5). From an identity politics perspective it matters that

> lesbian and gay men speak for themselves (here in the medium of film), that homosexuality is openly and directly represented, and that lesbians and gay men have films that speak both on their behalf and also to them, recognising them as an audience.
> (Dyer and Pidduck, 2003, p6)

The relevance of speaking on their own behalf /for themselves – is linked to one of the foundations of identity politics – Michel Foucault's concept of 'reverse discourse' (1976/1998, p101).[36] One of the basics of identity politics is this idea of empowerment through assuming a sexual identity. Foucault stresses the importance of discourse formation in his seminal first volume of the *History of Sexuality* (1976/1998). Rejecting the repressive hypothesis of sexuality in the Victorian era, Foucault demonstrates how discourses around sex were, instead, flourishing in this period; this was a 'discursive production [...] of power' (p12). Medical discourses were produced – psychology, sexology – which, according to Foucault 'constructed around and apropos of sex an immense apparatus for producing truth, even if this truth was to be masked at the last moment' (p56). It is within these flourishing discourses[37] that Foucault situates the

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[36] Foucault's ideas have, obviously, been explored exhaustively in feminist theory (Deveaux, 1994) and lesbian and queer theories (see Butler, 1999). Here I employ his concept of discursive practice and 'reverse' discourse.
[37] Elsewhere, Foucault lengthily explored the meaning of discourse and discursive practice, arguing that discourses are always historically constructed (1969, 2003).

moment when the identity of the homosexual was first assumed from within

a medicalised discourse on 'perversity':[38]

a whole series of discourses […] made possible a strong advance of social
controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation
of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf[.]
(1976/1998, p101)

Self-identification, through a 'coming-out' narrative, assuming an identity,

even if the historical context constructs that identity as pathological or

criminal is central to identity politics.

The prevalence of the older lesbian as widow in contemporary

representations leads to a situation in which a 'coming out' speech is the

condition for visibility. Assumed to be heterosexual unless otherwise stated,

the older lesbian's sexual identity is rendered invisible – unless she comes

out. In this context, the moments when a character comes out, assuming a

lesbian identity are of particular relevance.

However, by assuming an identity, the individual enters the discourses of

power that define normative and non-normative identities and specific

cultural meanings attached to that identity, are, thus, linked to the individual.

Entering the discourse of power through this assumption of a non-normative

identity can indeed be ambivalent.

The films I analyse in this thesis present both examples – empowerment

through assuming a sexual identity and the stigmatisation leading to a

refusal of an identity.

Grov *et al.* point out the positive and negative contexts in which an

individual comes out. Coming out cannot be considered as an indisputably

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[38] See, for instance, Carpenter (1912), Ellis (1901, 1921) or Krafft-Ebing (1886, 1998).

desired end (Grov *et al.*, 2006, p116). O'Connell (1999) expands on the ambivalence of assuming a gay identity:

> The experience of owning such identities is liberatory [sic] to the extent that it frees one from the determination by others of what counts as a good and meaningful life, preempts the derogatory power of such labels to police action, and provides one a language in which to articulate who one has become. At the same time, because these identities carry with them layers of meaning, and in particular insist upon the conflation of sexual identity with identity, their adoption can be experienced as constraining, inhibiting.
>
> (1999, pp73-74)

Notes on a Scandal portrays one character's defence mechanism against derogatory labels. I read Barbara's (*Notes on a Scandal*) refusal of a lesbian identity in light of queer theory's destabilisation of fixed identity categories. Two concepts challenged are that of 'spinster' and 'friendship' as I will argue in Chapter Five.

Spinster is a negatively charged word, constructed in terms of female deviancy and aberrant womanhood (Fink and Holden, 1999, p233) within the context of a patriarchal culture. The identity of the spinster is linked to a woman's irrecoverable 'past', defined 'by what has not happened' (Carroll, 2007, p6). And yet, I will read Barbara Covett's self-identification as a spinster in terms of a queer subversion of the concept. I will draw on Judith Halberstam's concept of queer temporality (2005) in order to establish Barbara's queerness. I further link her subversion of a socially appropriate friendship between women to the concept of romantic friendship. Research in the area of a cultural history of lesbianism has contributed to an understanding of what has been defined as romantic friendship, intimate relationships between women in the eighteen and early nineteenth centuries (Faderman, 1985). The concept of romantic friendship has been

articulated by several scholars as proto-lesbian in terms of the history of lesbian identities; some define it as free of social stigma in an era prior to the medicalisation of same-sex relationships (Faderman, 1985). Sheila Jeffreys describes it as follows:

> In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries many middle-class women had relationships with each other which included declarations of love, nights spent in bed together sharing kisses and intimacies, and lifelong devotion, without exciting the least adverse comment.
>
> (1985, p185)

To a certain degree, this was a type of relationship free of stigma and not necessarily considered of a sexual nature (Diggs, 1995), although there is little consensus regarding this among theorists and/or historians.[39] As argued by Marylynne Diggs, there is no clear division between a pre-sexological period in which women's romantic friendships were socially accepted or even encouraged as preparation for heterosexual marriage and a period in which same-sex relationships have been pathologised (1995). I read Barbara and her concept of friendship as existing in an anachronic 'queer time' (Halberstam, 2005) of romantic friendship which allows her to express her desire for Sheba without the derogatory identity.

New Queer Cinema

The emergence of queer theory is linked to the writing of Butler (1999) and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1991) and their contribution to gender theory. In terms of representation, queer theory rejects the idea that positive images of gays and lesbians will contribute to challenge homophobic attitudes in

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[39] For a detailed exploration of several approaches to the concept of romantic friendship and its problematic use in the context of lesbian studies see Wahl (1999) or Vicinus (2004).

society and proposes to unsettle fixed concepts about gay and lesbian identities by presenting transgressive representations. It is in this context that new queer cinema emerges as an alternative expression to both long-standing stereotypes of mainstream cinema and the one-dimensional attempts to represent gays and lesbians more positively. As Jackie Stacey and Sarah Street explain

> new queer cinema seemed to offer a challenging voice from the margins (politically and artistically) that was not asking to be allowed into the mainstream representation (in any senses of the term), but which asserted its difference with a proud defiance.
>
> (2007, p5)

Constituted mostly by male directors[40] and exploring gay male themes and characters, new queer cinema has been accused of marginalising lesbian directors, story-lines, and issues (Rich, 2004, p54; Wilton, 1994b, pp6-8). An indication that very few films portray lesbian characters and relationships is the fact that *Go Fish* (1994) is often cited as the 'token-lesbian' film within new queer cinema.

Throughout my thesis, I establish a reading that considers the absence of 'positive' images and the overbearing visibility of 'negative' images while allowing for a reflection that moves beyond the identity politics debate and draws on a queer theory approach to 'evil' lesbian images. As Clare Whatling notes, a sole focus on 'positive' images fails to recognise 'the *pleasure* we obtain from so-called negative images of ourselves, what are to some, "the baddies"' (1994, p194). A queer theory-based perspective has offered some routes into considering the transgressive potential of such representations, by appropriating these images as disruptive of the hetero-

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[40] Jennie Livingston and Rose Troche constitute the exception.

patriarchal establishment and celebrating them as empowering (Barootes, 2007; Jermyn, 1996; Sears, 1992).

Images of the lesbian as apparitional, on the other hand, tend to disappear in front of the viewer's eyes. The older lesbian in particular tends to be (or becomes) ill and/or pass away; her image becomes invisible. This is what I explore next.

Disappearing Ghostly Bodies

As Annamarie Jagose correctly notes 'lesbianism has been figured as a problem of representation – perhaps more properly, a problem of representability' and she admits 'the ambivalent relationship between the lesbian and the field of vision' (2002, p2). Diverse mechanisms of erasure are responsible for these disappearing bodies.

Terry Castle explored the apparitional quality of the lesbian and the ghosting of lesbian characters throughout Western literature during the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. Castle argues that the 'literary history of lesbianism [...] is first of all a history of derealization' (1993, p34) and that the lesbian 'remains a kind of "ghost effect" in the cinema world of modern life: elusive, vaporous, difficult to spot' (1993, p2). The author enquires about the 'phantasmagorical association between ghosts and lesbians' (1993, p60).

The concept of the apparitional consists of one of the most extensively used concepts in lesbian studies and has been explored across diverse cultural texts (Berenstein, 1998; Carroll, 2007; Carroll, 2008; Hoogland, 1997; McLeod, 2001). Castle's argument, based on examples from the

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literary history of lesbianism is transferable to other areas where the lesbian is erased, for instance in biographical accounts. According to Castle 'virtually every distinguished woman suspected of homosexuality has had her biography sanitized at one point or another in the interest of order and public safety' (1993, p5). Most relevant to this context are its uses within film studies (Noble, 1998; Whitt, 2005). Berenstein applies this concept in her analysis 'of what might be called a dyke disappearing act' (1998, p16); Noble argues that 'lesbian desire has always haunted a mainstream, popular imaginary' (1998, p1). Jan Whitt employs the concept of the apparitional to the de-lesbianisation of the relationships in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991)[41] and *Color Purple* (Spielberg, 1985) – films in which the literary lesbian characters Idgie and Celie become 'apparitional' in the respective film adaptations (Whitt, 2005), proving the continuity of the ghosted lesbian in contemporary cultural representations as well as the relevance of Castle's concept.

My own contribution builds on the same kind of argument of the apparitionalisation of the lesbian in film. Within my analysis this notion is, however, more pertinent as it is positioned alongside the tendency to make the ageing body disappear (Markson, 2003; Woodward, 2006). Castle's premise of lesbian representability seems particularly relevant to one of the modes of representing the older lesbian – as ghosted:

> One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized. The vision is inevitably waved off.
>
> (1993, p34)

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[41] In the UK, the film is also known as *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* (the full title of Fanny Flagg's 1987 novel on which the film was based on).

In terms of cinematic representation, a similar erasure of lesbian images has been recognised by Stacey who argues that any 'visibility, any open expression of affection, any desire for recognition is perceived as excessive: two lesbians are a crowd' (1997, p66).

The problem with ghosting relates to its effect in terms of the cultural meanings produced '[o]nce the lesbian has been defined as ghostly – the better to drain her of any sensual or moral authority – she can then be exorcised' (Castle, 1993, p6). The ghosted becomes unreal and, as Butler maintains, 'to be called unreal [...] is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond human, the less than human' (2004, p30). It is in this sense, that I will formulate the ghosting of the older lesbian woman – through images of illness, dying and death – as a process through which she becomes *'other'*.

It is in this context that I refer to a liminal state of being. The period of liminality is temporary, transitory. As noted by Lucy Kay *et al.* (2007), 'liminality is about process, it is always dynamic and is diachronic as well as synchronic. Liminality entails doubleness and is ultimately fluid and unfixable' (2007, p8). The representation of the older lesbian however is fixed as liminal through the ghostly imagery. Originally applied within anthropology, the concept of liminality is now of significance in a wide range of areas (Kay *et al.*, 2007). Victor Turner first built on Arnold van Gennep's notion of 'threshold' rites, in his seminal work on the 'ritual processes' of the Ndembu (Turner, 1987). Of particular interest in this context, is Turner's notion of liminality as an interstructural situation. As Turner explains, 'If our basic model of society is that of a "structure of positions," we must regard

the period of margin or "liminality" as an interstructural situation' (1987, p4). As the subject passes through the stages of separation, liminality, and reincorporation, she 'passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state' (Turner, 1987, p5).

In the previous chapter I argued that the representation of the ageing body in decline is a recurrent image for older female characters. The otherness of the older woman, both as old and as female, is distanced from the normative body – youthful, active, healthy and usually male. The construction of cultural *others* depends, thus, on the representation of their 'disappearance' – for instance through illness and/or the narrative of decline (Gallagher, 2009; Markson, 2003). In what follows I will introduce work by lesbian and gay film theorists that provide further examples of how 'not only individuals but also groups have defined themselves against what they are not but wish to control' (Goodwin and Bronfen, 1993, p20).

The Death of the Lesbian *'Other'*

Research concerning the representation of death (and of terminal illness) has highlighted aspects of the construction of otherness (Bronfen, 1993; Gallagher, 2009; Goodwin and Bronfen, 1993). Work in the area of gay and lesbian representation in film similarly has explored the particular meanings surrounding the death of the sexual 'other' (Cottingham, 1996; Creed, 2003; Fullagar, 2001, p393; Russo, 1987).

Writing in the 1980s, Russo argued that in the films he surveyed narrative closure was achieved with the death of the lesbian or gay characters, who 'dropped like flies in the Sixties, and for as many reasons

as there were tragedies' (1987, p156). Russo argues that overt, active or predatory gays were killed off and that survival 'was an option only for nonthreatening characters, and almost all homosexuals threatened the heterosexual status quo by their very existence' (1987, p156). Creed concurs, arguing that characters 'guilty' of same-sex love were 'almost always punished at the close of the narrative: sometimes they were murdered, sometimes they died of a tragic illness or conveniently committed suicide' (2003, p152).[42]

Russo's synthesis of gay and lesbian film plots sounds comfortably remote, confined to past decades, and as Alison Darren suggests, unacceptable to modern lesbian audiences (2000, p45). With more sympathetic gay characters and more varied storylines, it is striking that some patterns are repeated in films from the 1990s, 2000s and our current decade: lesbians of all ages are prone to suffer fatal accidents,[43] commit suicide[44] or suffer from incurable diseases. Simone Fullagar's observation that in 'the realm of popular culture the construction of lesbian identity has involved a peculiar embodied relation to the figure of death' (2001, p393) rings particularly true when considering images of the ghosted older lesbian, in the figure of the terminally ill or dying character, or the lesbian widow (as I will explore in Chapter Four). Obviously there are contemporary mainstream films that do not include the suicide and death plot, such as *Imagine Me &*

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[42] See following footnotes for examples.
[43] For instance, *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000).
[44] Less frequent, suicide does nonetheless reappear occasionally – for instance in the Canadian film *Lost and Delirious* (Brookes, 2001) – in which a teenage love story ends in the tragic suicide of one of the girls; in *The Hours* (Daldry, 2002) – in which same-sex desire and of suicide constitute a *Leitmotif:* through the historical and diegetic suicide of Virginia Woolf, Laura Brown's (Julianne Moore) attempted and Richard's (Ed Harris) actual suicide; or in *Loving Annabelle* (Brooks, 2006), where suicide is not a plotline, but it is revealed that one character's former lover committed suicide.

You or *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001).[45] But the thematic of death, murder and suicide has been reiterated to such an extent over the years that it still has a strong presence in some viewers' memory.

When combined with narratives of ageing as decline, lesbian images resemble Russo's previous models of representation, stereotypical plotlines 'smuggled in' under the disguise of the frail, ageing body in decline. Ageing here becomes the overbearing signifier, as suggested by Dittmar:

> Aging, a biological process readily available to the viewing gaze, has long functioned as an overdetermined signifier signalling physical and economic incapacity, social marginality, and impending death. The bodies that inspire such narratives are seen as ravaged – stiff-joined, gnarled, and decaying – rather than changing.
>
> (1997, p70)

Although I do not wish to pursue an audience study, it is important to consider that a return to a configuration of lesbian sexuality as perverse, deviant and pathological or to a model of lesbian invisibility will present different meanings to viewers who grew up and/or came out in a pre-Stonewall era.

Kimmel and Sang note the importance of considering the historical context of identity formation for gay men and lesbians who are in their later years: 'we must recall the context in which this cohort of gay men and lesbians constructed their identity and the beliefs they held about their lives as a result' (2002, p602). They highlight the impact of the Gay Liberation movement that started in 1969 with 'protest demonstrations following a

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[45] The list is longer when including films across the mainstream/independent divide, for instance, *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love* (1995), *Late Bloomers* (1996), *Losing Chase* (1996), *The Watermelon Woman* (Dunye, 1996), *Chasing Amy* (Smith, 1997), *But I'm a Cheerleader* (Babbit, 1999), *Do I Love You?* (Gornick, 2002), *April's Shower* (Doolan, 2003), *My Summer of Love* (Pawlikowski, 2004) or *The Gymnast* (2006).

police raid on the Stonewall Inn Bar in Greenwich Village, New York City'

(2002, p602):

> That event began to change the social construction of homosexuality from a personal pathology to minority-group membership. Some middle-aged persons were active participants in the historical events that brought about those changes.
>
> (2002, p602)

Similarly, if we consider viewers in their sixties or seventies today, the monstrous lesbian, for instance, might not be seen as a transgressive, welcome change from domesticated, 'positive' gay images.[46] Indeed, as mentioned above, there has not been a saturation of screen images (positive or any) that satisfy the need for 'positive' representations.

Next, I introduce work on the monstrous, abjection and otherness. These concepts have been explored in the context of lesbian representation in film. While I draw on this research in order to highlight the continuity of certain themes within contemporary cinematic representations the originality of my project lies in linking these to the ageing body of the lesbian.

The Monstrous 'Other'

Another central theme in lesbian representation, which can be located as a metaphor both in lesbian studies and in the representation of lesbian characters is the trope of the monstrous or abject. Extensive research has been done around the spectre of the abject or the monstrous lesbian as Paulina Palmer concurs: the representation of 'the lesbian in fiction and film

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[46] As reviewers argued regarding the stereotype of the 'evil lesbian' in *Notes on a Scandal* (Eyre, 2006). See Buchanan (2007).

as monstrous and the relegation to the realm of the abject are so common as to require little illustration' (1999, p14).

Jeffrey Cohen notes that one can understand a culture by the monsters they engender (1996, p3). The representation of the lesbian or the lesbian body as monstrous (Creed, 1993; 1995; Fullagar, 2001; Hanson, 1999) is revealing about our culture's fears and anxieties. According to Creed, the monstrous is produced at the border between 'normal and abnormal sexual desire' (1993, p11). The horror film genre is densely populated by figures positioned as abject, such as, the witch, the vampire, the lesbian, which are all constructed as abject in patriarchal discourse. Abjection is at the centre of my analysis of otherness.

The above images can be seen as 'negative' images (through an identity politics-based 'positive' images perspective) or can be approached differently from a queer theory-based oppositional perspective. Oppositional readings considered in this thesis consist of appropriations of negative or stereotypical images (as that of the monstrous 'other') and the queering of heterosexual texts, characters or actresses.

In her work on the female psychopath, Deborah Jermyn considers the pleasure of identifying with transgressive figures, seen as an empowering subject position for the female spectator. Jermyn claims that 'the female psychopath can also be read as offering progressive or oppositional possibilities for female spectators, for confronting dilemmas and exercising a behaviour in which they are not usually allowed to indulge' (1996, p252). Arguing along the same line, Creed discusses the possibilities of spectator

identification in the horror film genre. Identifying with the monster allows the spectator to go beyond permitted behaviour:

> The monster [...] takes us to the limits of what is permissible, thinkable, and then draws back. [...] it permits the spectator to wallow vicariously in normally taboo forms of behaviour before restoring order.
>
> (1993, p37)

Abject Age

In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva elaborated the notion of the abject with a discussion of Freud and Lacan in order to locate instances of abjection in literature and culture. Kristeva's theory of abjection furthers our understanding of the discriminatory practices derived from being positioned as 'other'. Of particular relevance for my purposes are Kristeva's anthropological sources, rather than her formulations within a psychoanalytic framework.

Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966) illustrate how notions of pollution and the instrumental implementation of pollution dangers are connected to the prohibitions and respective (bodily and social) boundaries within a specific cultural context. As Douglas indicates, domains of abject are imposed in order to maintain order – 'certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (1966, p3). Arguing along the same lines, Kristeva asserts 'abjection assumes specific shapes and different codings according to various "symbolic systems"' (1982, p68).

Since 'everything symbolises the body' and 'the body symbolises everything else' (Douglas, 1966, p122), bodily pollutions – constructed

around the body's orifices and fluids – are connected to instances of social pollution in an effort to maintain the ideal(ised) body as a pure and clean surface (p122). In terms of pollution, 'all margins are dangerous' (p121), and since body fluids have crossed the inside/outside boundary of the body, they are considered polluting – 'spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So also have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat' (Douglas, 1966, p121).

According to Kristeva, the abject is part of the subject, while simultaneously constituting that what has to be rejected, 'Not me. Not that' (1982, p2). The abject causes discomfort, it unsettles the sense of self, of identity, it has to be expelled for order to be restored:

> Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.
>
> (Kristeva, 1982, p4)

The above provides the foundation of my reading of the abject on two levels. On the individual level as something that one has to part with, such as a body part, an emotion or desire, and on a social and cultural level something, or someone – the 'other'/monstrous – that unsettles the established order and has, thus, to be expelled.

Butler's arguments around the constitution of a proper self, of 'coherent identities' (1993, p115), about the repudiation involved in maintaining a heterosexual subject are central here. In the context of Butler's formulation, homosexuality becomes the abject of the heteronormative, heterosexual matrix (1993, p111). Identity formation and maintenance depends on the

'compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary' (p114). In combination with Shildrick's (2002) theorisation of the boundaries between the vulnerable, pure, proper self and the monstrous 'other' (that I will introduce below), these theories provide the foundation for an analysis of the older lesbian as abject 'other.'

Several studies on ageing have indeed established this connection between ageing and abjection (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010; Kaplan, 1999; Sandberg, 2008; Ussher, 2006). In Ann Kaplan's article 'Trauma and Aging' (1999) the author argues that the old woman can be read as abject: 'old women are what we have to push away from both the social body and even the individual body in order for that body to remain clean, whole, pure' (1999, p188). The ageing body constitutes a reminder of the inevitable process of biological decline, towards decay and death. The old female body is constructed as abject in our youth-oriented culture, and has to be expelled from culture (as well as from our own body) in order for the normative youthful culture (or self) to remain whole and pure. On an individual level, the abject elements of age, such as body fat and wrinkled skin, have to be eliminated or hidden. In order for our body to remain 'clean, whole, pure' we have to discipline it through dieting, exercising, and by smoothing out wrinkles. All these processes symbolise the discharging of superfluous bodily elements – abject elements. On the social level, the older female body has to be hidden in order to preserve the ideal, normative youthful body. The pressure to comply with the ideal of the youthful body means that any signs of age have to be eliminated.

As the link between the living and the dead, the ageing body becomes a polluting object, which in Kristeva's terms, can be seen as one of the polluting objects that determine the abject:

> Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the danger of identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death.
>
> (1982, p71)

Gail Weiss's approach to the notion of the abject can be seen in parallel to ageing and the older female body (1999). The author applies the term to body image formation. Reading Lacan and Kristeva, Weiss is trying to find 'new models to distinguish between "normal" and "abnormal" body images' (1999, p89) in an attempt to indicate alternative ways of thinking about and treating anorexia. Weiss argues that abjection is necessary because 'some aspects of our corporeal experience must be excluded to enable the coherent construction of both the ego and the body image' (p90), since 'processes of abjection and the corresponding construction of an abject domain, are part and parcel of the formation of our body images' (p90). Informed by Grosz, Butler, and Kristeva, Weiss notices that this process of exclusion is never successful, since 'that which is excluded is not eliminated altogether but continually "erupts" and therefore disrupts the privileged sites of inclusion' (1999, p90). By substituting 'fat' for 'old' in the following excerpt, Weiss' argument becomes relevant to the present forthcoming analysis:

> By abjecting the 'fat' body from the culturally constructed aesthetic domain, people and not just body parts are designated as the abject

other, doomed to exist in those uninhabitable, unlivable regions that Butler reminds us are, in point of fact, densely populated.

(1999, p99)

The necessity to reject combined with the impossibility of parting completely with the abject, results in an ongoing struggle. Note that the domains of the abject are constructed as such by the culture they integrate. Therefore, when referring to the feminine, the lesbian, or the ageing body as abject, my intention is to engage in a critique of hegemonic cultural and symbolic values which determine categories and domains of abjection.

While all phases in the development of the female body can be constructed as abject,[47] two types of pollution dangers collide in the ageing female body. Jane Ussher (2006) demonstrates how, by establishing the reproductive body as abject, its different stages (from the menstruating body to the post-menopausal body) have been medicalised. The menopausal body constitutes the border between two domains of abjection, one last manifestation of corporeality out of control (Ussher, 2006, p143) before entering the abject domain of old age. Ussher argues that the discourse of shame and disgust around the experience of hot flushes, and the increased sweating 'exemplifies the notion of the fecund body as abject because of failure to maintain clean and proper boundaries' (p143).

Research such as this suggests that the persistent construction of femininity as abject can be extended to additional domains of the abject when considering lesbian sexuality or ageing. Through ageing, an additional layer of abjection is added to the already doubly abject lesbian (Creed, 1993; Fuss, 1991). As Sandberg argues, the 'old, sagging, leaky, female

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[47] In particular, the body of the pregnant woman, the 'leaky maternal body' (Shildrick, 2002, p30), constructed as abject and monstrous (Creed, 1993; Shildrick, 2002).

body could in many instances be regarded as the very quintessence of the abject' (p128).

Arguing along the lines of Kristeva and Creed, Shildrick's exploration of the monster as a category of embodiment that has 'the potential to confound normative identity' (2002, p5) adds a new dimension to the concepts of both the abject and the monstrous. In line with Kristeva and Creed, Shildrick argues that women have always been defined in opposition to masculine ideals of reason and civilization, branded as 'out of control, uncontained, unpredictable, leaky: they are, in short, monstrous' (2002, p31). Shildrick's contribution, however, adds the concept of vulnerability to the Monstrous Other: through contact with the 'other', the pure self's sense of 'normalcy' is contaminated with otherness.

Shildrick's notion that able-bodiness as the normalcy that is always vulnerable to the threat of contagion from the monster links gender, age and sexuality through the idea of failure in terms of maintaining boundaries. In this context, Shildrick allows me to draw together the concepts of otherness, abjection, monstrosity and contagion as they intersect in cultural constructions of the older lesbian. According to Shildrick, the encounter with the *'other'* disrupts our own sense of being; we are made to recognise the monster as both 'other' and part of our self:

> The encounter with the others who defined by our own boundaries of normality must inevitably disturb for they are irreducibly strange and disconcertingly familiar, both opaque and reflective. They enable us to recognise ourselves; they are our own abject.
>
> (2002, p69)

This encounter with the monstrous 'other' is not detrimental, since it serves the purpose of disputing the 'givenness of any body' (p10). It

facilitates 'the realisation that a standard is not normal but normative' (p50); and brings into evidence that the normal body is materialised through 'a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard' (p55). In the context of this thesis, Shildrick advances my analysis of the processes through which the older lesbian (body) destabilises the standard of heteronormative youthful femininity. By conceiving of this monstrous encounter as one between spectator and screen image, a relation of engagement (of identification) with the monstrous image challenges the concept of the normative audience as young and destabilises the normative youthful structure of the look.

Theories of Spectatorship

Theories of spectator identification and the notion of the active audience are central to studies of lesbian representation. In addition to the meanings formulated around gender, age and sexuality in the mainstream film texts I will analyse, it is fundamental to consider the type of spectator addressed, available subject positions and the opportunities for pleasurable identifications for the lesbian spectator.

Laura Mulvey's work on gaze theory and the spectator constitutes one of the landmarks within feminist film theory and is impossible to pass by without mention. What needs to be stressed in this context is Mulvey's role as a 'catalyst for considerations of sexual difference and spectatorship per se' (Bergstrom and Doane, 1989, p7).[48] Mulvey's contribution was essential in the proliferation of theories of viewing, theories of identification,

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[48] For a more extensive account of the emergence of the concern with spectatorship within film studies see the special issue of *Camera Obscura* on "The Spectatrix," especially Berstrom and Doane (1989).

pleasures, even if, as Bergstrom and Doane note (1989, p7), there is no trace of the female spectator in Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975/1990). Her groundbreaking essay examined the pre-existing patterns of Hollywood cinema in terms of its 'manipulation of visual pleasure' (p30). As Mulvey argued, the 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female' (p33), and the image of the woman on screen has come to connote a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (p33). Mulvey analysed how in classical Hollywood cinema the male gaze is aligned with the look of the spectator: 'the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude' (p33). This brought the active/passive traditional gender dynamic into evidence, as well an inherently heteronormative viewing process.

Mulvey's work exerted a deep influence on feminist film theory and several theorists expanded on her theories, while still situating themselves within a psychoanalytic framework (Creed, 1993; Kaplan, 1982/2005; Kaplan, 1997; Silverman, 1988). More relevant for my analysis are explorations of identification, multiple spectator positions and the addressed audience, which distance themselves from a traditional psychoanalytic framework (Arbuthnot and Seneca, 1990; Stacey, 1990; 1994; Tasker, 1994; 1998). Mulvey's strict binary thinking and close adherence to psychoanalytic theory has been criticised, and several theorists demonstrate the inadequacy of the psychoanalytic framework for feminist film theory (Bergstrom and Doane, 1989; Dyer, 1992, pp4-5; Thornham, 1997, pp118-125; Wilton, 1994c). Dyer advises against the use of

psychoanalysis as 'master discourse of truth', noting that it is 'normatively phallocentric and homophobic' (1992, p4) and, besides, takes 'a negative view of pleasure' (1992, p5).

It has to be noted, however, that the explorations of female spectatorship generated by Mulvey's essay 'have opened the way to an analysis of other kinds of differences within audiences' (Bergstrom and Doane, 1989, p9).

One recent addition to the gaze theory is the conceptualisation of the 'gaze of youth'. Twigg points out that besides the concept of the male (or phallic) gaze, there is also 'a gaze of youth' which is embodied by media imagery and can be powerfully coercive for the ageing individual subjected to this gaze (2004, p65). An example of the construction of the gaze of youth is presented by Woodward in her analysis of *About Schmidt* (Payne, 2002). Here, an ideal spectator is textually constructed as younger, and, therefore, superior to the older characters:

> The youthful structure of the look – that is, the culturally induced tendency to degrade and reduce an older person to the prejudicial category of old age – also underwrites, I would argue, the relation of the spectator to the characters in the film. The spectator is positioned as younger and thus as superior to Schmidt (or vice versa).
>
> (2006, p164)

The youthful gaze, or the youthful structure of the look can be seen as constitutive of normative heterosexuality, subsuming the norm of youth as a silent rule within the form of mainstream film. This ageist construction of the preferred address or the ideal spectator as 'young' emerges as a crucial element within this thesis.

Identification and Character Engagement

The idea of a purely masculine-determined gaze has been challenged within feminist film theory, as has the rigid binary structure of Mulvey's conceptualisation of the gaze along the binaries of active/male/looking and passive/female/to-be-looked-at-ness. A proliferation of work around the concept of the female spectator suggests a less rigid understanding of the gaze and a more fluid approach to spectator positions.

Mary Ann Doane approached Mulvey's theory from the female spectator's point of view, considering the possibility of her reversing the relation of being the object of the gaze and 'appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure' (Doane, 1982/1990, p44). The logic to which the female spectator is tied means that for her to *look* and assume the gaze, she has to position herself as the 'other', in this case the masculine, 'invoking the metaphor of the transvestite' (p48):

> Given the structures of cinematic narrative, the woman who identifies with a female character must adopt a passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain "masculinization" of spectatorship.
>
> (Doane, 1982/1990, p48)

Doane is referring to Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts' (1989), which considers the possibility of cross-gender identification. The female spectator position is thus theorised beyond the determination of same-gender identifications, and the possibility exists for the 'woman spectator's masculine 'point of view' (Mulvey, 1989, p30).

Stacey argues that these theories of female spectatorship remain problematic in so far as 'they theorise identification and object choice within

a framework of binary oppositions (masculinity/femininity: activity/passivity) that necessarily masculinise active female desire' (1994, p27). According to Stacey, feminist film criticism has 'failed to address the possible homoerotic pleasures for the female spectator' (p27).

Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca's reading of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953) does not consider homoerotic pleasure although the authors present an alternative spectator position, claiming the pleasures of mainstream cinema for female spectators. Arbuthnot and Seneca read *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* 'against the grain' of the predominant meaning, arguing that this film 'can be read as a feminist text' (1990, p112). The authors' interpretation of this classical Hollywood film focuses on the relationship between the two female protagonists, arguing that the 'friendship between two strong women [...] invites the female viewer to join them, through identification, in valuing other women and ourselves' (p113).

The process of identification of a spectator/reader with a fictional character underlies both identity politics and queer theory perspectives. In the first instance identification is seen as an affinity with a possible role model while, in the second instance, transgressive characters constitute the point of identification.

Most considerations about character engagement spring from a literary theory of narrative. Focalisation is the key element in considering how the reader of a literary text identifies with a certain character, since the extent to which the narrator assumes the focalisation of the main character or secondary character, influences the reader's involvement. Considering the shared features between literary narrative and narrative feature films, such

as, plot structure, narrative focalisation and character (development), theories of literary character engagement have informed work on spectatorship and identification.

Murray Smith suggests an alternative terminology, one which 'posits several distinct *levels of engagement* with fictional characters, which together comprise what I call the *structure of sympathy*' (1995b, p5). In the context of this thesis I mention this expression in order to consider possible identifications with characters.

Lesbian Viewing Strategies

It has been compellingly argued that mainstream film texts present multiple meanings, and spectatorship positions, depending on the viewer's interpretative strategy. Seen that satisfying representations of strong female protagonists, lesbian characters, or non-stereotypical black women have been scarce in mainstream cinema, these practices emerge as alternatives to absence and invisibility. As Paula Graham notes, '[o]ppositional readings of popular culture do play a substantial part in the construction and reconstruction of oppositional cultures' (1994, p180).

As has been suggested by Christine Gledhill, one has to rethink 'the relations between media products, ideologies and audiences – perhaps bridging the gap between textual and social subject' (1988, p67). Gledhill proposed the concept of *negotiation*; which as a model of meaning production,

> conceives cultural exchange as the intersection of processes of
> production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching

determinations operate. Meaning is neither imposed, nor passively imbibed, but arises out of a struggle or negotiation between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience.

<div align="right">(1988, pp67-68)</div>

The concept of negotiation establishes a connection between complex, polysemic film texts and an equally multifaceted audience who bring their own experiences and expectations into the viewing of a film. Negotiation is fundamental to conceive of lesbian spectatorship and lesbian viewing strategies, as I will show next. Research in this area has however ignored age as an integral identity category, as an element to be taken into consideration when conceiving of spectatorship positions and preferred audiences within a text.

Research on the issue of lesbian spectatorship has moved away from a text determined, binary psychoanalytic model towards an audience based approach. Stacey proposed the following:

If 'spectatorship' is simply a textual position, then there may only be a masculine or a feminine option; however, if spectatorship refers to members of the cinema audience, surely the possible positionings multiply.

<div align="right">(1994, p29)</div>

Considering that lesbian possibilities are, as a rule, obstructed within the conventional narrative film structure, a shift towards the concept of an actively engaged audience advances our understanding of how lesbian viewing practices reclaim these possibilities. Wilton concurs, noting that the 'ability to spectate/consume from multiple positions is becoming a given in lesbian cultural criticism' (1994c, p156). This flexibility seems necessary in order to enjoy mainstream cinema, since 'only a tiny proportion of films construct a lesbian viewing position or enable lesbians to enjoy

<div align="center">114</div>

uncomplicated identification with either onscreen character or voyeuristic camera' (Wilton, 1994c, p144). With the proliferation of younger lesbian characters in recent mainstream film, lesbian viewers can now be expected to have more opportunities of identification. These do, however, exclude images of ageing as I have argued before and, once more, a problem of lack is presented.

The absent older body or the disappearing older body are problematic as points of identification; because the body, as Doane explains, is central to the engagement with fictional characters:

> The mechanism of identification with a character in the cinema pivots on the representation of the body. Narrative is a mise-en-scène of bodies and while images without bodies are perfectly acceptable within its limits, it is the character's body which acts as the perceptual lure for and the anchor of identification.
>
> (1980, p26)

In relation to another type of absence, Nataf argues that the black lesbian spectator has a similar 'schizophrenic response to mainstream, popular film' (1995, pp57-58). Her viewing experience is characterised by the realisation that mainstream culture rarely reflects 'anything that resembles her life, doing so only in ways that are stereotypical and marginal, or monstrous, fetishising and othering' (1995, pp57-58). The same argument has been made regarding lesbian stereotypes in film (Becker *et al.*, 1995, p26; Sheldon, 1980, p5; Weiss, 1992, p1; Wilton, 1994a, p2).

Claiming presence where it does not exist in the text thus emerges as an alternative to the absence or stereotypical representation and has been a fundamental concept for marginalised viewers. As Jill MacKey maintains, 'we make up for the lack of representation of ourselves by "reading against

the grain" for representations of women that we might appropriate and interpret as signs of lesbian love and desire' (2001, p86). In the context of this thesis, these practices will be considered as a valuable alternative to the invisibility of the ghosted lesbian or the overbearing presence of the monstrous, abject 'other.'

Studies in gay and lesbian popular culture have paved the way for an exploration of the complex relationship between mainstream cinema and its non-heterosexual consumers. Corey Creekmur and Alexander Doty suggest that homosexual men and women 'have always had a close and complex relation to mass culture' (1995a, p1). Complex because faced with a sense of exclusion from seemingly heteronormative mainstream representations, alternative meanings had to be found. As the authors indicate, the messages contained in popular culture are malleable and gay men and lesbians adopted 'an alternative or negotiated, if not always fully subversive, reception of the products and messages of popular culture' (Creekmur and Doty, 1995a, p1).

Reading 'against the grain' has likewise been theorised in terms of feminism (Arbuthnot and Seneca, 1990; Jermyn, 1996), black (lesbian) studies (Bobo, 2004; Nataf, 1995) or social class (Brunsdon and Morley, 1978/1999). Implied is an actively engaged audience, who inscribes their own meanings into a film text that appears lacking in some respect – whether in terms of strong female characters, roles for women of colour, images of ageing or lesbian storylines.

For Nataf, appropriation and oppositional readings constitute an empowering alternative to the lack of representation:

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> Pleasure in the place of erasure, invisibility, misrepresentation and othering is already progress. Pleasure that empowers and transforms certainly gives a political role and function to the active reading of the text as well as the forms of representation.
>
> (1995, p57)

Jacqueline Bobo holds a similar opinion; she presents two options for the marginalised black viewer:

> One is a positive response where the viewer constructs something useful from the work by negotiating her /his response, and /or gives a subversive reading to the work. The other is a negative response in which the viewer rejects the work.
>
> (2004, p187)

The possibility of a lesbian reading depends on a similar negotiation between the predominant or 'official' meaning of the film text and 'moments of resistance and disruption' (Jermyn, 1996, p266; MacKey, 2001). Analysing reviews of the film *Personal Best* (Towne, 1982), Elizabeth Ellsworth demonstrates how lesbian feminist reviewers appropriated this film through a variety of interpretative strategies: some 'resisted the narrative's heterosexist closure and imagined what would happen to the characters in a lesbian future' (1990, p193); others 'ignored large sections of narrative material focusing on heterosexual romance, making no reference to their existence or conventionally obvious implications for the film's preferred heterosexist "meaning"' (p193).

The most comprehensive theorisation of lesbian appropriation has been carried out by Whatling (1997). The author argues that in order to appropriate a film, it does not necessarily have to contain a (lesbian) subtext: 'there is no such thing as a lesbian film. Films are rather

lesbianised by the individual' (1997, p5). This does not mean the interpretation lies exclusively with the spectator's desire (p6), certain elements facilitate appropriation of characters, actresses or storylines. The qualities of the actress and her star-persona, whether the character she plays is coded as heterosexual (or rather, presents a neutral or ambiguous sexual orientation) is crucial in terms of appropriation.

In Chapter Six, I propose an alternative to contemporary paradigms of representing the older lesbian woman based on lesbian appropriation strategies. There has been extensive research on actresses who, due to their roles or public engagement with certain political issues, are considered favourites among lesbian audiences. The complex intertwining of biographical elements, the types of roles they are conventionally cast in, the characters they perform adds to an actress's star-persona. Dyer has examined the importance of stars and their projected star-personas for gay and lesbian audiences (1998; 2004).

Age as an analytic category has not been considered as part of this theorisation of lesbian spectatorship. Indeed, as I explored in the previous chapter, age has not been given due attention within sexuality, gender or film studies. It comes thus as no surprise that lesbian spectatorship practices have not been considered beyond youth-centred images. A youthful structure of the look conceives lesbian viewers as *younger* and leads the focus towards younger actresses' lesbian 'potential' according to underlying ageist assumptions. Drawing on previous lesbian readings, I will address this shortcoming by considering how actress Judi Dench is a suitable candidate for a lesbian reading.

Most scholars agree that some actresses are more suitable for lesbian appropriation than others. Women who are 'masculinised' as protagonists (Graham, 1994, p179), for instance, are symbolically distanced from the traditional female gender role and the heterosexual norm and will be more easily appropriated from a lesbian point of view. Sigourney Weaver and Linda Hamilton, for instance, have been appropriated for these reasons.

Strength, autonomy, and independence seem to be the main characteristics which allow for 'the forging of a lesbian body by appropriating and hypostatising the covert or even disavowed significations of lesbianism (or at least of non-heterosexuality)' (Whatling, 1997, p58). Indeed, the absence of heterosexual signifiers, not being coded as heterosexual or at least presenting the character's sexuality as ambiguous or fluid is another fundamental aspect, as pointed out by Ros Jennings in her analysis of Weaver's Ripley in *Alien* (Scott, 1979): 'although she was not coded as lesbian or bisexual, to my immense surprise/relief, neither was she specifically coded as heterosexual' (1994, p193).

In the case of Ripley's character (Weaver) it has to be noted that *Alien* (1979) had been written for an all-male cast and Ripley was rewritten as a female character by suggestion of the president of 20th Century Fox (see: Gallardo and Smith, 2004, p9).[49]

It would seem that characters who are initially written as male and eventually performed by female actors present the characteristics that allow them to be appropriated by lesbian viewers. A similar gender switch happened to the character M in the Bond film franchise when the role was

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[49] Similarly, Angelina Jolie's character in *Salt* (Noyce, 2010) had been cast as Tom Cruise, who dropped out of the project. Agent Edwin Salt became Evelyn Salt (see: http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/22/entertainment/la-et-salt-20100722).

offered to Judi Dench. Dench's character M is at the centre of my analysis of the actress' several subversive film roles in Chapter Six.

Judi Dench

Not much has been written about Judi Dench's film career. Most publications focus on her theatre performances and there are biographical (Miller, 1999; 2004) and autobiographical writings (Dench, 2010; Dench and Miller, 2005) that thoroughly document her vast acting career and theatre roles. In terms of her film career – which started over 15 years ago with the 1995 Bond film *GoldenEye* (Campbell) – no sustained research has been carried out. Apart from Kord and Krimmer (2005), who include Judi Dench in their study on Hollywood alternatives, no major research discusses Judi Dench's film roles and performance. In their work, Kord and Krimmer present her as an alternative to the stereotypical roles conventionally ascribed to women but fail to address the actress' age, which, in the context of the limited availability of roles for older women, is more significant.

I therefore analyse Judi Dench and her film roles as a final case study for this thesis. I focus on her as an older actress and I examine her unconventional performance of gender and age. In doing so, I propose to *(mis)read* Dench by exploring her film persona in terms of a challenge to age and gender conventions. From her role as M in the Bond films (since 1995) to Mona Carvell in Sally Potter's *Rage* (2009)[50] these characters expand the possibilities for older women beyond the limits imposed by ageism and sexism.

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[50] Also available on: http://www.babelgum.com/rage

Drawing on a variety of resources, I establish a critique of the ageist and sexist undertones contained in newspaper and magazine articles that reiterate Judi Dench's 'national treasure' status. Her star image is associated to the notions of tradition (national treasure) and framed within normative notions of gender and age, as will be revealed by my analysis. Work in the area of stardom offers some routes to understand the complex and sometimes contradictory meanings associated to stars (Dyer, 1998; 2004; Perkins, 1991).

The star-persona is of major significance in the context of appropriation and reading against the grain. As Dyer points out, the 'star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars' including 'interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and "private" life' (2004, p2). In addition, the audience has an active role in shaping the meaning of a star-persona:

> the audience is also part of the making of the image. Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them.
>
> (Dyer, 2004, p4)

Through this reading I contrast Dench's public perception as a 'saintly' 'national treasure' with the meanings conveyed by the succession of transgressive female characters and 'lesbian roles' she has played on film.

Alternative resources, such as, online entertainment websites, fan sites and forums provide the element of 'gossip' that facilitates a lesbian appropriation (Weiss, 1992; Whatling, 1997). Expanding on Halberstam's comment about Judi Dench's transgressive performance in the Bond films (1998, p3), I *(mis)read* M as a possible heroine for lesbian audiences:

Reading mainstream films subversively, lesbians have constructed heroines who do not officially belong to them, not only by disrupting the authority of the heterosexual male gaze, but also by appropriating the heterosexual woman as a homosexual object. From Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo and Bette Davis, to Catherine Deneuve, Jamie Lee Curtis, Jodie Foster and Whoopi Goldberg, there has been long tradition of lesbian appropriation of actors who've played strong, autonomous women.

(Smyth, 1995, pp123-124)

Conclusion

In Chapter Two and Chapter Three I surveyed existing literature in a range of fields in order to generate a theoretical context for this interdisciplinary project. While in the previous chapter the focus was on research around the category of age/ing, in the present chapter I focused specifically on conceptualisations within gender and lesbian film studies. As I have established, there are extensive resources regarding contemporary postfeminist representations of lesbians on screen but these do not provide the conceptual tools to understand the invisibility and absence of the older lesbian. To an extent, the hypervisibility paradox is mirrored in existing studies on lesbian representation – there is a growing interest in analysing recent manifestations of 'new' lesbian visibility, while research on ageing and older lesbians is still lacking.

As seen at the beginning of the present chapter, a feminist critique of postfeminist cultural visibility can be extended to available lesbian images. These studies illustrate the characteristics of the hypervisible paradox. I have argued that in order to account for the absences, the stereotypical presences and disappearing bodies in film earlier moments of lesbian and

gay film criticism would be referred to. Theorists such as Russo, Weiss, Wilton and Castle provide concepts which I revisit through an age studies perspective. I have also considered both the 'positive' images and the queer theory approach to representations of older lesbian characters.

I draw on Castle's concept of the apparitional and examine its relevance when analysing themes of illness, death and mourning. As I suggested, the representation of death is linked to the construction of otherness and I have surveyed relevant theory on this topic. In terms of the abject and the monstrous, I have identified existing studies that establish the link between these concepts and the category of ageing.

Though this multidisciplinary review of literature I contextualised relevant concepts that will further my investigation into the under-research area of images of older lesbian women. The fact that within these diverse areas no sustained analysis of the intersectionality of age, gender and sexuality has been carried out indicates the importance of my own contribution. The following chapter constitutes a first analytical chapter in which I apply concepts introduced here to specific film texts that illustrate the ghosting of the older lesbian character, the pervasiveness of storylines around illness, death and mourning and existing alternative representations. It centres on the variations on the theme of the 'ghosted' lesbian (Castle, 1993) when intersected with narratives of ageing as decline. The next chapter, Chapter Five, considers how lesbian desire, embodied by an older body, combines the image of the monstrous lesbian with the concept of the abject ageing body, resulting in several layers of abjection and, thus, of *otherness*. My final chapter turns to another fundamental concept within lesbian film

studies by considering oppositional reading practices as an alternative to either the ghosted or the monstrous forms of representing the older lesbian. I challenge the structure of the youthful gaze as I appropriate an older actress by way of her queer roles and transgressive screen persona.

Chapter Four

Ghosting the Older Lesbian in Film

Introduction

This chapter constitutes the first analytical chapter in this thesis. In previous chapters I addressed existing research on lesbian representation and images of ageing and identified the most relevant concepts. I established that no sustained research on older lesbian women in cinema has been carried out thus confirming the importance of the present study. I also characterised the main paradigms of representability in contemporary mainstream cinema. In line with a postfeminist discourse, older heterosexual characters are representable through the image of the 'sexy oldie' (mostly within the 'older bird chick flick' genre). Older lesbians have been excluded from this paradigm and it seems that a sexual older body only becomes representable in the context of a (monogamous) heterosexual relationship set within a traditional heterosexual family unit. The terms of lesbian representability, on the other hand, revolve around youthfulness in the figure of the 'chic' lesbian, an image that replicates normative standards of beauty (she is young, slim, feminine, sexualised).

The visibility of the lesbian body is framed/constrained by postfeminist modes of lesbian representability (Ciasullo, 2001; Gever, 2003; Hamer and Budge, 1994; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009). Ciasullo demonstrates how the 1990s lesbian body is 'made "tasteful" for the viewing public – made, in essence, palatable for mainstream consumers to consume' (2001, p579) by portraying her as the youthful, (hetero)sexualised 'lipstick lesbian' or 'chic' lesbian. Ciasullo denounces the hypervisibility of the image of the conventionally attractive lesbian, allowed to appear 'via the femme body' while the 'body or image that is made invisible is the "butch"' (2001, p578).

Perceived as (un)attractive, the butch is not consumable (Ciasullo, 2001, p600) within a cultural landscape that integrates lesbianism as heterosexual titillation (Jenkins, 2005, p492). The absence of the butch lesbian in cultural representations is problematic since it is the most visible lesbian identity formation – butch, according to Sally Munt, is 'the recognisable public form of lesbianism' (2001, p95).[51]

The 'older bird chick flick' and the 'lesbian chic' paradigm both exclude/ render invisible lesbian women in their sixties, seventies, eighties or beyond. As the predominant modes of representing the older woman and the lesbian woman converge, images of older lesbian women are doubly excluded. According to my findings, available representations of older lesbians do not fit either of these paradigms of representability. In order to explore the intersectionality of age, gender and sexuality I revisit concepts that evoke earlier moments of lesbian film scholarship. The first one is the concept of the ghostly (Castle, 1993), which provides the main conceptualisation for themes of illness, dying and mourning. It also provides the vocabulary to describe the ghostly lesbian widow, an image that constitutes one of the most visible representations of the older lesbian.

In this chapter I approach these representations from an identity politics perspective. This perspective's focus on the (positive/negative) meanings attached to certain sexual identity categories, in this case lesbian, allows an evaluation of its representation within a culture which (still) presumes heterosexuality 'as the biological, psychological, and moral standard' (Phelan, 1989, p4). In this chapter, it allows me to examine how modes of

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[51] For a history of the butch body see Munt (2001); for detailed exploration of masculine femininity, incuding butch gender see Halberstam (1998); and for a study on gender identity development of butch lesbian women see (Hiestand and Levitt, 2005).

representing non-heterosexual characters (i.e. through the concept of the ghostly) have not changed despite, for instance, the new queer cinema movement or lesbian hypervisibility in contemporary culture.

To do this I analyse *Love Actually* (2003) and explore its traces of lesbian erasure – which only become revealed in the 'deleted scenes.' The effect of this process leads to a doubly ghosted notion of the older lesbian. I also provide other examples of younger lesbian characters who have similarly been ghosted through the storylines of terminal illness and widowhood. These are contextual and set the scene for the main films analysed in this chapter.

While in each of the main films analysed in this chapter the same thematic is reiterated, I emphasise particular elements in each of them. In *Love Actually* the doubling of the ghosting process; in *Hold Back the Night* (1999) it is the simultaneous revelation of terminal illness and a lesbian identity; in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (2000) the succession of tragic events that establish the older couple's otherness from the lighter tone of the remaining narrative segments; while *The Shipping News* (2001) stands as the alternative in terms of presenting the thematic of loss and mourning without 'othering' the older lesbian character.

Combining elements of the apparitional (Castle, 1993) with the concept of ageing as decline, I illustrate the continuity of the apparitional lesbian image through these examples in contemporary mainstream cinema. The process of ghosting is, in this context, interpreted as a process of constructing the older lesbian 'other.' Storylines of illness and death

culminate, thus, in reiterative 'unhappy-endings' and the figure of the older lesbian widow emerges as the ultimate definition of the lesbian as ghostly.

Ghosting the Older Lesbian

The 'ghosting' or apparitionalisation of the lesbian in nineteenth-century literary texts as proposed by Castle (1993), remains a valuable concept in approaching the representation of lesbian identity in culture, despite the 'new' visibility of lesbian images in contemporary media. Looking at lesbian characters in *Hold Back the Night*, *If These Walls Could Talk 2* and *The Shipping News*[52] there emerges a *Leitmotif* of ghosting – through the themes of terminal illness and death – as the marking feature of the older lesbian woman in film. The continuity of the notion of the ghostly is established by the figures of the carer, the sick lesbian, the deathbed lesbian, and the widow. These characters accurately illustrate Castle's argument about the representability of the lesbian: 'One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one' (1993, p34). The ghostly thus emerges as one of the possibilities of representing the lesbian over sixty in contemporary film. The second possible on-screen manifestation comes through the predatory or monstrous lesbian which becomes my main focus in the following chapter.

While the theme of terminal illness restates the concept of ageing as decline, thus equating old age with bodily decline and death, the death of the lesbian character constitutes a familiar strategy for narrative resolution within the history of lesbian representation in film. The intersection of the

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[52] For synopses, see appendix 1.

category of age and sexuality accentuates, in this case, conventional modes of portraying both the ageing female body and the lesbian character.

It is relevant in the context of this thesis, and this chapter in particular, to conceptualise the process by which lesbian characters are made incorporeal and de-realised as opposed to being presented as fully developed, rounded characters. The 'ghost effect' of the lesbian is rendered more effective when combined with the invisibility that is characteristic of the older female body (Markson, 2003; Woodward, 2006). The transient quality of the older lesbian on screen compares to Castle's apparitional, 'ghosted' lesbian, who 'is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind' (1993, p2). As Castle suggests, the lesbian, although present, is always apparitional, it is difficult to see her 'because she has been "ghosted" – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself' (1993, p4).

Castle's concept of the apparitional is instrumental in interpreting absences in contemporary cinema. The terminal illness storyline stands in for the 'killing off' mechanism so commonly used to lessen the threat of lesbian characters to the heteronormativity in mainstream film prior to the 1990s (Creed, 2003, p152; Russo, 1987). One type of ghosting that I wish to acknowledge here, without exploring it in too much detail, is the type of erasure that takes place in *Iris* (Eyre, 2001). Castle's claim that 'virtually every distinguished woman suspected of homosexuality has had her biography sanitized' (1993, p5)[53] is confirmed in this biopic. As a reviewer notes, Iris Murdoch's bisexuality is downplayed (Ferber, 2002). This is

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[53] Castle refers to Sappho, Greta Garbo, Queen Christina and Eleanor Roosevelt (1993, p5).

understandable given the fact that the script was based on her husband's memoir (Bayley, 1998) and thus presents his version of Murdoch's life. A brief shot of 'younger' Iris (Kate Winslet) in the company of another woman is the only trace left of Murdoch's bisexuality. In this case the double disappearance is split along the age binary – the 'younger' Iris's bisexuality is ghosted, while the 'older' Iris (Judi Dench) disappears within the narrative of decline provided by her Alzheimer's.

Before I proceed with my analysis of the older lesbian in association with illness, death and mourning, I wish to emphasise the permeability of these categories. The ghosted older lesbian is simultaneously present/absent, visible/invisible and living/dead. As I will discuss in this chapter, the close association with illness and death positions the older lesbian character as liminal subject, 'between and betwixt' different states (Turner, 1987). In a significant number of films containing the portrayal of illness, cancer is suggested, something that adds to liminal quality of the character.[54] A particularly strong cultural fear surrounds cancer as an illness, as addressed by Stacey (1997) and confirmed by the characters analysed here (I return to Stacey on below, on page 136). These states or categories are permeable, transient and interstructural (Turner, 1987) and the same character will frequently experience one or more of these states or categories in a rapid succession: care-giver, sick or dying lesbian, widow and the lesbian-as-ghost.

The 'living' older lesbian is portrayed as either the carer or the grieving widow. The sick lesbian obviously is more strongly associated with the

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[54] See, for instance, Little *et al.* who note that the experience of cancer patients has been described as liminal: 'An initial acute phase of liminality is marked by disorientation, a sense of loss and of loss of control, and a sense of uncertainty' (1998, p1485).

prospect of mortality and her liminality most evident in the sickbed/deathbed scenes, which situate her in the interstices of life and death. The care-giving partner is similarly in-between a past and coming state, positioned between 'having a partner' and widowhood, a transition visually represented through the deathbed scene (Bronfen, 1993; Gallagher, 2009).

The widow is defined precisely by the lack or absence of a partner, and whether she is introduced as such from the outset or becomes one as the story progresses, the association to the 'past' confers a ghostly quality. The tendency of making the ageing female body invisible (Markson, 2003; Woodward, 2006), combined with mechanisms of lesbian erasure (Castle, 1993; Cottingham, 1996), results in lesbian characters that disappear either by account of their age or their sexual identity.

At the intersection of old age and lesbian sexuality, the lesbian widow emerges as the ultimate example of lesbian ghosting in contemporary cultural representation. The ghostly can easily be 'exorcised' (Castle, 1993, p6). This ghostly quality becomes problematic in terms of cultural visibility, since, within this era of visual supremacy, only the representable, visible aspects obtain cultural validity, become 'real' (Gever, 2003, p29). Without the confirmation that mainstream visibility confers to bodies, groups and identities, certain images remain unseen and linger in the margins of cultural existence, remain outside 'the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible' (Fuss, 1991, p4).

Next, I will evaluate the implications of these representational categories, as they interlink with modes of representing ageing femininities and lesbian sexuality in film. As these modes intersect, and the disappearing ageing

body in decline and the ill or dying lesbian combine in their ghostliness, the older lesbian is constructed as 'other' on multiple levels.

Themes of Terminal Illness

The main categories through which the older lesbian character is defined as ghostly consist of the dyads of the ill lesbian and her caregiver and the widow and her absent partner. The terminal illness (and death) plotlines are not exclusive to older women, as I intend to illustrate with the example of *Fried Green Tomatoes* (1991)[55] and *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her* (García, 2000).[56] *Boys on the Side* (Ross, 1995)[57] similarly portrays terminal illness, but in this case it is the guarantee of death that allows the confession of same-sex love (coming from a heterosexually identified character). I return to this film when talking about its deathbed scene. These films do not contain older lesbian characters, but they establish the context for my analysis of themes of terminal illness and lesbianism later in this chapter.

    Fried Green Tomatoes is often cited as an example of lesbian erasure, since the characters Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker) and Idgie (Mary Stuart Masterson) have been 'delesbianised.' Their sexual and romantic relationship in the source novel (Flagg, 1987) has been 'adapted' into a version of 'sentimental female friendship' (Hollinger, 1998, p7), their lesbian identity ghosted (Whitt, 2005), as I briefly mentioned in my previous chapter. Their story, which some lesbian viewers read as 'definitely a lesbian story' (Dobinson and Young, 2000, 101), comes to an end when Ruth becomes ill.

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[55] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.
[56] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.
[57] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.

After a final deathbed scene (figure 1), Ruth 'disappears' and Idgie becomes a widow.

Figure 1 – Deathbed scene: Ruth's (Mary-Louise Parker, right) last moment with Idgie (Mary-Stuart Masterson) in *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Avnet, 1991)

Another example of the 'othering' effect of the terminal illness storyline is *Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her* (2000). One of its five interrelated storylines, (inter)titled 'Good night Lilly, good night Christine,' centres on Christine (Calista Flockhart) and her terminally-ill partner Lilly (Valeria Golino) (figure 2). The fact that Lilly is in her thirties, confirms the pervasiveness of the terminal illness plotline along the chronological age continuum of lesbian characters.

In *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her* (as in *Love Actually*) the use of this plotline and respective ill character/care-giver dyad can be interpreted both as normalising strategy and as presenting the lesbian as other. On the one hand, they are represented as conventional, 'normal'; the viewer is invited to engage sympathetically with their experience of pain and suffering. In the context of these multiple stories Christine and Lilly's can be

seen as just another example of a troubled female character. On the other hand, it is precisely the lesbian storyline that involves terminal illness, while other stories centre on loneliness, unrequited love or abortion. In a final succession of scenes, in which a sense of closure is given to each story, one brief shot focuses on Christine feeding two canaries; Lilly is absent. She has 'disappeared' from this concluding shot, and we can assume that she has lost her battle against cancer. What the viewer is left with is the image of the widow – feeding the two canaries (Lilly had suggested they should buy some in an earlier scene). The two birds become symbolic of Christine's mourning process.

Figure 2 – Deathbed scene: Lilly (Valeria Golino, right) and Christine
(Calista Flockhart) as illustration of the terminally ill/carer dyad in
Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her (García, 2000)

I mention this example of a younger version of the ill/dying lesbian character and her carer/widow to provide a context for my analysis of ageing as decline as it intersects with other tragic lesbian storylines. While there are other representational options for younger lesbians, it is this narrative of decline that becomes the predominant mode of representing the

older lesbian. The pervasiveness of these strategies can be located across cinematic genres and fictional characters' age categories. *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her* and *Love Actually* illustrate this phenomenon of the ill-lesbian/carer dyad[58] across age categories – from women in their thirties to women in their sixties, respectively. Although this choice can be understood in terms of a normalising strategy, inviting the 'sympathy' of the viewer (Walters, 2003, p221), in effect, the lesbian characters are constructed as *'other'* in relation to the remaining characters. The structure in both films consists of multiple storylines intersecting; in both the lesbian couple is singled out precisely by a terminal illness storyline.

Illness of course implies the pathologisation of lesbianism as deviant sexuality (see Carpenter, 1912; Ellis, 1901, 1921; Krafft-Ebing, 1886, 1998). Stacey addresses the cultural taboo around cancer (coincidentally the type of disease repeatedly depicted in the films mentioned in this chapter). The author compares the cultural taboos that have 'constructed cancer as stigmatised illness' (Stacey, 1997, p62) to a similar prohibition around the L word, i.e. 'people's anxieties about saying the word 'lesbian'' (p66). Stacey's analogy points to the fact that the depiction of an ill lesbian evokes not so distant notions of the pathologisation of homosexuality (see, for instance: Diggs, 1995; Seidman, 2004). If the terminal illness plotline ever had the effect of establishing the lesbian character as absolutely ordinary, 'see, they look just like us' (Walters, 2003, p221), this 'normalising' strategy is certainly diminished by this association of concepts.

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[58] An alternative scenario is presented in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* in which Edith is denied the role of the carer, as well as that of the widow (at least officially).

The Death of the *'Other'*

Although the representation of death and dying can be considered in the broad sense of a universal human experience – and thus a central cultural concern – in the context of this thesis, two specific kinds of fictional death have to be seen in terms of the meanings generated. The death of the ageing female character on the one hand, and that of the lesbian character on the other, intersect in the figure of the older lesbian woman.

In Chapter Two, I established that the representation of death and the construction of otherness are closely linked (Bronfen, 1993; Elias, 1985; Hallam *et al.*, 1999). The biological changes of an ageing body 'in decline' provoke 'anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction' (Hallam *et al.*, 1999, p21). Ageing anxieties and the fear of death are nonetheless appeased through relegating them onto the 'other'. And, as Bronfen suggested, *woman* is already *the 'other'* within dominant cultural representations and images of death and femininity abound (1993, p.xii).

The death of the 'other' in film, through the 'killing-off' of certain characters, has been interpreted as an assertion of heteronormative control (Doane, 1991; Markson, 2003; Weiss, 1992). This translates into one of the models of representing the older woman in film as the 'disintegrating ill or dying female body' (Markson, 2003, p95).

And just as the ghostly is more easily dismissed as non-existent (Castle, 1993), by defining someone as the *'other'*, they can easily be made to disappear. This becomes evident in the 'disappearance' of one character in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*. As previously established, the logic of the

disappearing body is closely linked to the cultural representation of death: 'first we see it, then we don't' (Woodward, 2006, p163).

In this chapter I am concerned with the death of lesbian and gay characters in terms of a 'killing off' mechanism (Creed, 2003, p152; Russo, 1987). This has been identified as a common storyline in pre-gay liberation films containing gay characters as Russo illustrated (1987). As I mentioned in the previous chapter, and as I will argue next, characters that threaten the *status quo* or are otherwise deemed superfluous to predominantly heteronormative narratives can be 'disposed of'.

In her reading of death in lesbian themed films of the early 1990s, Chris Holmlund similarly argues that the ill and dying body disrupts the same-sex couple and de-sexualises their relationship – 'once the film's femme is transformed into an angel, its butch necessarily becomes always only a tomboy: death guarantees the "delesbianization" of their relationship' (2002, pp81-82). Holmlund is referring specifically to the character Ruth (Mary-Louise Parker) in *Fried Green Tomatoes*, who she identifies as a 'dead (lesbian) doll' – as opposed to the 'deadly dolls' in, for example, *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) (2002, p75).

In *Boys on the Side*[59] the terminal illness plotline similarly defers the possibility of a lesbian relationship, until the moment of the deathbed scene. The dialogue that takes place in the hospital (see figure 3) between Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) and Jane (Whoopi Goldberg) is revealing. Note the similarity between this one (figure 3) and the previous screenshot (figure 1

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[59] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.

on page 134); both of them present the same actress as 'dead (lesbian) doll' as Holmlund (2002) identified Ruth in *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Figure 3 – Deathbed scene: Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) confesses her love for Jane (Whoopi Goldberg) while expressing her last wishes in *Boys on the Side* (Ross, 1995)

Robin, whose heterosexual identity had been reaffirmed throughout the film, admits (on her deathbed) to a lesbian crush in the past and confesses her love for Jane – in exactly the same sentence in which her funeral arrangements are made:

> ROBIN: I had a crush on a woman once. I was ten. [...] She was a strawberry blonde. That's what my mom called her. She was a baby-sitter at the hotel we stayed at right before my dad went to Vietnam. She was beautiful. Strawberry blonde.
> JANE: I used to be a strawberry blonde, too.
> ROBIN: It was me you loved, wasn't it?
> JANE: Yeah. Still do.
> ROBIN: Well, I loved you, too... I don't want a funeral, but mom will. But it's got to be here. Don't let her take me back to San Diego.
>
> *Boys on the Side* (Ross, 1995)

This intersection of (the admission of) love and impending death is carried towards a final scene between the two characters, in which, Jane

joins in when a visibly frail Robin starts singing Roy Orbison's 'You Got It.' Before the end of the song, the camera pans around into Robin's empty wheelchair. Robin's impending death allowed the confession of a teenage crush, a lesbian gaze, and a love song, the threat of lesbian desire contained.

The deathbed scene is of particular relevance in this context, as it provides insight into the ideological motivation of this type of storyline. Its functions, as suggested by Gallagher, are to 'bookend or catalyze narrative action' (2009, p210) or to 'provide the climax of a dolorous-romance narrative' (p213). In the case of female-friendship films they supply closure: 'women are free to befriend other women as long as one of them is destined to die' (p213).

Creed associates this convention with the 'buddy film' in which 'the death of one or both friends has become a narrative convention [that] works to suppress questions of homosexual desire at a point where the narrative has run its course and the audience is wondering what these men will do next' (1995, p98). Buddy-romance adventure stories as Kuhn (1994) calls them, such as *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991), constitute the female equivalent. This similarly applies in films where two female characters cross the thin line between (socially acceptable) friendship and romance (Dobinson and Young, 2000; Hollinger, 1998) and/or in 'female friendship films with lesbian undertones' (Creed, 1995, p98).

In terms of the older lesbian, the deathbed scene acquires a different functionality, a discussion I will return to when looking at *Hold Back the Night*. Markson argues that the image of the dying older woman 'provides a

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model against which spectators can perform a self-assessment, reassuring themselves of their own wholeness by projecting their fears of aging and death outward' (2003, p95). The older lesbian woman is more aligned with this function than with what has traditionally been ascribed to the lesbian in film – usually a threatening figure (Fleming, 1983; Russo, 1987), who competes with 'a heterosexual man for a sexually unformed woman, a plot often ending in violence, murder or suicide' (Dyer, 2002, p22). If her age is visible, while her sexual identity is concealed, the older lesbian woman is automatically perceived as heterosexual, and she 'automatically enters the dominant discourse, as heterosexual woman' (Kuppers, 1998, p51). Consequently, according to the dominant cultural discourse, she is perceived as asexual. The single or widowed older lesbian is less perceptible as a lesbian – what is first and foremost noted in a youth-centred culture is her age, the 'overdetermined signifier' (Dittmar, 1997, p70). Recalling Holmlund's suggestion that in the absence of the femme, the butch 'necessarily becomes always only a tomboy' (2002, p82), I argue that on her own, the older lesbian woman becomes always only an 'old lady'. If old age denotes asexuality, her lesbian identity is 'diluted' once she is perceived as old.

Through the pervasiveness of the concept of ageing as decline, the age identity is superimposed on a lesbian identity both in the figure of the carer and the ill lesbian. Despite the possibility of understanding the normalising effect of these shared experiences, the lesbian is defined as ghostly. The reiteration of this thematic, and the continuous representation of the lesbian as 'other' is what becomes problematic.

In the following section, I focus on the figure of the lesbian widow. Here, again, the lesbian is invisible – her lesbian identity made invisible, through the absence of her partner. She only becomes recognisable as lesbian, once her loss is revealed. In the absence of a partner, her age identity takes precedence.

The Lesbian Widow

Once the ending of the terminal illness storyline predictably ends with the death of one of the characters the figure of the widow emerges. A widow is defined by the absence of her partner, the lack of her lover. The lesbian widow is the lesbian character who appears on her own, having lost her partner at some point in time.[60] Here I am concerned about the politics of representation, the meanings attached to the lesbian widow on screen as it intersects with the conventions of representing older heterosexual women and lesbians in film.[61]

According to Laura Cottingham, lesbian themed narratives 'deflect and contain the possibilities for lesbian content from the outset by presenting only one lesbian-like character so that "the lesbian" is given no one to be a lesbian *with*' (1996, p27).[62] In the context of mainstream representation the widow is a 'safe' image since, in Cottingham's words, it implements an '*a priori* disappearance' (1996, p27).[63] In characters who are both *lesbian* and *old*, the convention of 'killing-off' (lesbians) converges with the traditional mode of representing the 'disappearing' ageing female body (Markson,

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[60] Other lesbian widows can be found in *Mona Lisa Smile* (Newell, 2003), *Loving Annabelle* (Brooks, 2006) and *Finn's Girl* (Cardona & Colbert, 2007). The characters in these films do not fit the age established for this thesis.
[61] For a qualitative study of lesbian widowhood see Whipple (2006).
[62] My italics. This links to de Lauretis' statement that 'it takes two women, not one, to make a lesbian' (1994, p96).
[63] My italics.

2003; Woodward, 2006). The few visible images are of characters who are liminal and transitory ('between and betwixt' life and death).

The films mentioned so far, such as *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Boys on the Side* and *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her* provide a context of continuum in terms of the ghosting of lesbian characters. In the analysis that follows, the ghostly quality of the older lesbian character is equally generated by themes of terminal illness and confirmed by widowhood as narrative closure. By the end of the storylines described above, Lilly (*Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her*), Ruth (*Fried Green Tomatoes*) and Robin (*Boys on the Side*) have disappeared; while Christine, Idgie and Jane (respectively) become in/visible as widows. These same themes pervade the films analysed next. As we will see, Vera (*Hold Back the Night*), Abby and Edith (*If These Walls Could Talk 2*) disappear before the final scene. *The Shipping News* differs from these in that it presents a character who, although widowed, is not confined to an existence in the past and who, in establishing a new relationship, becomes visible as a lesbian. The themes theorised so far are prominent in the four films analysed next. As I have suggested before, it is through the intersection with the modes of representing ageing as a process of decline, with the older female body tending to 'disappear,' that in the first three films the older lesbian woman is doubly 'othered.'

Deleted Scenes: *Love Actually*

Love Actually is a British romantic comedy which similarly deploys multiple characters and intersecting storylines.[64] That the only trace of a lesbian relationship can be found in the deleted scenes (in the bonus material section of the DVD) is an indication of the heteronormativity of this film, supposedly exploring the pervasiveness of love in its different incarnations.

This exceptional situation, by which I focus on the deleted scenes of a film (considered complementary or irrelevant in comparison to the main feature), further accentuates the ghostly quality of the lesbian image. This 'apparition' of lesbian characters in a bonus section of the non-theatrical version of *Love Actually* compellingly illustrates Castle's point about the paradoxical nature of the lesbian ghost in a digital age – though nonexistent (in the main feature) 'it nonetheless *appears*' (1993, p46).

This ability to re-appear seems particularly true in our age of digitalization, in which erasure or the act of forgetting becomes more difficult. Viktor Mayer-Schönberger notes that '[s]ince the beginning of time, for us humans, forgetting has been the norm and remembering the exception. Because of digital technology and global networks, however, this balance has shifted. Today, with the help of widespread technology, forgetting has become the exception, and remembering the default' (2009, p2). DVD editions reflect this tendency, featuring 'behind the scenes' and 'scenes from the cutting room' – moments that would otherwise have been forgotten.

A brief consideration of the specific viewing contexts of a DVD's deleted scenes is in place. When it comes to editing a film, there are obviously a

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[64] For a brief synopsis, see appendix 1.

variety of reasons why deletions have to be made, whether due to the director's personal and artistic decision, 'to enhance the overall impact of their work' (Barlow, 2005, p81) or 'in order to meet external demands, such as ensuring a running time that allows a maximum number of daily showings' (Barlow, 2005, p81). Indeed, on this DVD, each segment is introduced by a commentary stating the director's regret about deleting this particular scene. *Love Actually*'s director, Richard Curtis, explains that the unedited film was three and a half hours long and that at least eighty minutes had to be cut.[65]

As Deborah and Mark Parker point out, current DVD editions 'brim with supplementary materials' (2005, p124) and one should not dismiss 'the transformative nature of this change in format' (p124). The authors argue that this creates a new relationship between film and audience:

> The DVD collection is essentially a reorientation of the film, often carried out by a variety of agents, and subject to a wide variety of choices made by the eventual viewer. Consciously or not, the DVD constitutes a new edition, and it should be seen in these terms.
> (Parker and Parker, 2005, p125)

Indeed, it is through this particularity of our digital age that two older lesbian characters become visible in the *new* edition of *Love Actually*. Whereas the viewing context is always relevant in determining meanings and audience engagement (Stacey, 1994, pp46-47), in this case, the absence/presence of these two characters is literally determined by the viewing context (cinema screening or DVD) and the choices made by the viewer (among the additional materials). Let us briefly consider the two relevant instances.

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[65] For an explanation about the reasons behind each 'cut' see the director's introduction before each of the deleted scenes (Curtis, 2003).

In the first instance, viewing *Love Actually* in the cinema on occasion of its theatrical release, there is no access to this plotline and the older lesbian characters are absent. In the case of the second scenario, of home-viewing on DVD, and provided that the viewer decides to watch the special features section on the DVD edition (including the deleted scenes),[66] it is revealed that certain stories were 'deleted.' In this context, my argument could return to the 'strategy of disappearance and erasure' (Cottingham, 1996, p48). Reversing the process of erasure, these materials surface in the 'archive' of deleted scenes. Although visible, these lesbian characters are confined to the realm of erased materials. As articulated by Avery Gordon, this is 'a kind of visible invisibility: I see you are not there' (1997, p16).

This means that, for more 'dedicated' viewers, there emerges a new version, one that includes a lesbian couple amongst the multiple storylines about love. Indeed, as Castle concedes in relation to the ghosted lesbian, to 'become an apparition was also to become endlessly capable of 'appearing'' (1993, p63). It is thus that the apparitional can be understood as haunting; in this sense the ghost of the older lesbian characters returns to haunt the scene even if in DVD extras. This also confirms Gordon's claim that the 'ghostly haunt gives notice that something is missing' (1997, p15). In this case, the older lesbian characters are missing from the theatrical version of *Love Actually*. But let us have a look at the deleted scenes.

Not surprisingly, the storyline that has been ascribed to the lesbian couple revolves around illness and death. In the special features, the

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[66] Or finds these scenes on a video sharing website, such as *youtube*. See, for instance, 'Love Actually - Emma Thompson Deleted Scenes' (final half of video): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KKMefLPFtGk&feature=related, and 'Love Actually Deleted Scene Scary Headmistress': http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ao_heePixQ&feature=related.

deleted scenes are included under the heading 'Behind Love Actually.' The segment entitled 'Bad Bernie' first introduces Anne Reid's character as the Headmistress who reprimands Bernie[67] about an essay he wrote. In the deleted segment entitled 'Scary Headmistress' Anne Reid's character (no name is mentioned) is further development. And, as opposed to a 'scary headmistress,' her character is represented as caring and kind.

The headmistress arrives at home where a bedridden Geraldine (Frances de la Tour)[68] awaits her and they discuss the day's events and dinner plans in an ordinary, domestic setting. Only then is their relationship made clear as Reid's character asks 'Are you alright, my love.' In accordance with the strategy Walters described, prior to the revelation of the two characters' sexual orientation their 'absolute ordinariness' is established (2003, p221).

The following brief scene shows the two women in bed, lying side by side. The image of two older lesbian women in bed is desexualised by the implication of a long term, terminal illness (the iconographic headscarf suggests cancer); they are both awake, Geraldine coughs and Reid's character, still awake, tenderly embraces her (figure 4).

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[67] The student is Bernard (William Wadham), Karen's (Emma Thompson) son.
[68] A headscarf suggests a cancer-related disease. This is the iconographic representation of cancer in film.'

Figure 4 – Deleted scene: lesbian couple, Geraldine (Frances de la Tour) and the 'Headmistress' (Anne Reid) in *Love Actually* (Curtis, 2003)

A final brief scene is set at the school's parents meeting where Bernie's mother (Emma Thompson) acknowledges Geraldine's death and offers her condolences to the headmistress. Watching the 'deleted scenes' in an uninterrupted sequence – removed from other diegetic content – the fast succession from one character's (domestic) role as care-giver to the 'state' of widow and the other's progression from illness to death is accentuated. Thus, the immediacy and the transitory-ness of each 'state' become evident. The decline becomes abrupt, immediate. In the final deleted scene, the headmistress is sitting in the audience, wearing a dark grey jacket and dark sunglasses – once more, the lesbian widow constitutes the final image. *Love Actually* thus illustrates the double erasure, firstly, through the 'killing off' mechanism in the form of a terminal illness storyline and, secondly, through the actual 'deletion' of this storyline.

To understand possible meanings ascribed to and produced by terminal illness plotlines, the broader context of lesbian representation in the media has to be taken into account. In her analysis of lesbian characters in

television, Danuta Walters observed the tendency to normalise lesbian characters by placing them in ordinary settings. Walter suggests that this ordinariness 'invites the "sympathy" of the viewer (see, they look just like us, or – really – just like other TV offerings of "normal families"), gaining a certain amount of identification' (2003, p221). Other authors have confirmed this tendency, observed mainly in television and involving younger lesbian characters.[69] Sarah Warn identified a recurrent 'pregnancy storyline' in television series, employed, as she argues, as a strategy to 'make the lesbian characters so "normal" and de-sexualised, viewers will almost forget that they're gay' (2006, p5). A similar argument was recently presented by Trish Bendix, who suggested that mainstream representation often results in less 'threatening' images and 'less threatening often equals pregnant' (2011, np). Bendix argues that it is the frequency of the pregnant lesbian storyline which makes it redundant:

> We need to see lesbian mothers on television just as we need to see single lesbian women, lesbians of color or lesbian couples who live together without feeling the need to procreate with some help from a male friend.
>
> (2011)

By inserting the lesbian into a 'linear and reproductive logic' (Carroll, 2007, p10) there is a sense of domestication, of normalisation of the lesbian couple. This is also the case in the third narrative segment of *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, that portrays the couple's success in becoming pregnant as the epitome of equality.[70] While the first and second segments engage with the relevant problematic of discrimination and gay rights, the final segment,

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[69] *ER* (1994-2009), *The L Word* (2004-2009), *Queer as Folk* (1999-2000) (see: Warn, 2003; 2006).
[70] Seen as an improvement from representations of the lesbian as sterile and barren. According to Fullagar, in the context of heteronormativity the lesbian body has long been constructed as 'the site of social death, for it is lesbian sexuality which signifies the end of biological reproduction and the fantasy of family values' (2001, p393).

set in contemporary America (year 2000) presents a discrimination-free social reality. This version of 'progress' is criticised by Keegan (2006), who argues that 'these lesbians have become acceptable to the hegemonic discourse through a mimetic exercise of heterosexual privilege: they are married, wealthy, procreative, and invested in the ultimate importance of the nuclear family' (2006, p118).

If the pregnancy storyline can be considered a conventionally 'safe' and reassuring option for younger lesbian characters, the corresponding option for lesbian characters over sixty revolves around the theme of illness, care-giving, of loss and bereavement. Both alternatives establish the 'absolute ordinariness' (Walters, 2003, p221) of the lesbian (couple). In addition, these themes favour the biological function over the socially constructed elements of the body. The former through the reproductive function of the female body; the latter by presenting biological decline (through old age and/or disease) as inevitable. Aligning the lesbian body with biology results in more conventional female gender roles, and possibly in a femininisation of the older lesbian.

The intersection of lesbian and old (in the dyad of the ill lesbian and the caring partner) is made ordinary, 'palatable,' by presenting the character in a 'domesticated' traditionally female role (as ill and dying, and thus frail and powerless, or as the care-giver, a role traditionally ascribed to women). This symbolic feminisation aligns with the normalising strategy of the terminal illness plotline. These representations are indeed consistent with stereotypical modes of representing (heterosexual) older women as either 'submissive caregivers or frail recipients of care' (Feldman and Poole, 1999,

p4). Gallagher recognises that in popular cinema 'women still become ill and die so regularly that narrative explanations are scarcely necessary' (2009, p214) and argues that defined 'in terms of frailty, immobility, and powerlessness, death is often connotatively linked to femininity' (2009, pp214-215). If frailty and powerlessness are connoted to femininity, more so is the role of the carer, since the 'sense of duty to care[,] historically ascribed to femininity' (Stacey, 1997, p212), continues in place. It would seem from my analysis that a feminisation of the lesbian is taking place through the role of the carer.[71]

In terms of audience engagement, terminal illness, death and mourning storylines can take two different functions as described by Gallagher, they 'can elicit polar responses from viewers: either immersion in or disavowal of a fictional characters' suffering, though often the responses conjoin' (2009, p212). This dual function has been established by Gledhill (1987) and Gallagher (2009). On the one hand, they provide a common, universal experience, thus encouraging audience engagement and empathy (Gallagher, 2009; Gledhill, 1987), while on the other, they provide the means to distance ourselves.

'I haven't always been a lonely old dyke': *Hold Back the Night*

While most of the films contain one or a variation of elements I have identified as contributing to the ghostly definition of the older lesbian woman, in *Hold Back the Night* a conflation of themes takes place. Vera's (Sheila Hancock) lesbian identity is juxtaposed with widowhood, mourning

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[71] Another example would be Clarissa (Meryl Streep) in *The Hours* (2002), who performs role of the *hostess* and that of the *carer*, two traditionally female activities.

and impending death. As argued, all these concepts consist of mechanisms of ghosting.

Vera comes out as a lesbian towards the end of the film. Up to the moment of this revelation, there is no indication of her sexual identity.[72] After Vera's emergency visit to the doctor, Declan (Stuart Sinclair Blyth) and Charleen (Christine Tremarco) show concern about her health and they suggest she continues her journey once her health improves. It is at this point that two revelations are made. First, Vera confesses that she is not going to get better, that her disease is terminal. Following the revelation of her terminal illness, she explains the ultimate purpose of her journey. She is going to Orkney in honour of her deceased partner, who had wished to watch the sunrise from the Ring of Brodgar but never did.

Figure 5 – Vera (Sheila Hancock) portraying an older
lesbian widow in *Hold Back the Night* (Davis, 1999)

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[72] Except for Charleen's suspicion – based on what she considers to be unusual behaviour for a woman (of *her* age) and the fact that Vera was in the army: 'She is fucking mad. Bet she is a dyke. [...] She said she was in the army. They're all dykes in the army.'

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Vera introduces her 'coming out' story with a reference to Charleen's derisive accusation in an earlier scene: 'I haven't always been a lonely old dyke' and shows them a black-and-white photograph of Jo, her partner. This convergence of the revelation of Vera's terminal illness with her 'coming out' as a lesbian transforms her ageing body in decline into a 'disappearing' lesbian body. This convergence links a familiar motif in cinema history, that of the lesbian character that dies (see Russo, 1987), with one of the modes of representing the ageing female body in contemporary cinema. Both contribute to the effect of de-realisation of lesbian characters (identified as ghosting by Castle), making them *less than*, different or 'other' within the narrative context they exist in.

Vera's function within this narrative does resemble the functions Markson (2003) and Gallagher (2009) attributed to the older female characters in film, in terms of enabling change in the lives of the younger characters and the progression of the narrative. Markson suggests that one of the functions of the elderly female character in film is to pass her wisdom 'on to the next generation' (2003, p97). Thus, 'the death of the caring older woman frees a younger individual to develop more fully as an adult' (p97). In fact, Vera's death bookmarks Charleen's transformation from an angry teenager on the run to a more mature individual who decides she is 'done running.' Vera provides a role model for Charleen, who is able to identify with the older lesbian woman through their shared experience of feeling 'weird.' The wisdom Vera passes on to the younger woman is construed from a shared position of the outsider.

Vera and Charleen's proximity enables intergenerational dialogue. Indeed, while their relationship is initially fraught with tension (due to Charleene's generalised belligerence), in the last stage of their journey an unlikely bond is established. With Declan's absence Charleen adopts the position of the carer. On her deathbed (leaning against one of the megaliths), Vera confides in Charleen, 'I was young once... thought I was the oddest girl in the world. There weren't any words for what I was... I had to keep myself a secret.' She explains how, through Jo, she found love and an identity, 'We fell in love. It was wonderful. ... She taught me so much. Not to be ashamed. Not to apologise for myself…' As a victim of sexual abuse, Charleen is able to connect with Vera's experience. Charleen's perception of Vera as the ageing, lesbian 'other', the 'lonely old dyke,' has given way to a recognition of common ground – the oppositional binaries young/old, heterosexual/lesbian are overcome. Charleen's own experience of a non-normative sexuality – as a sexual abuse victim – brings her closer to Vera's experience of otherness and she is able to engage with the older woman's story.

Figure 6 – Outdoor 'deathbed' scene: Vera (Sheila Hancock) passes away in Charleen's (Christine Tremarco) arms in *Hold Back the Night* (Davis, 1999)

This idea of being able to contribute to the younger generation is seen by Joann Loulan as one of the advantages of being an older lesbian: 'As middle-aged lesbians, we have seen a lot. [...] we have an opportunity to change ourselves and to have a part of that change spill over into our community' (1991, p17). The film suggests that there are connections to be made, similarities to be found across generations, gender and sexual identities.

The loneliness of old age and the fear of growing old and dying alone is surpassed and soothed in this narrative by the intergenerational friendship established between strangers. Vera's decision to help the two runaway teenagers leads to a mutually beneficial relationship. While Vera benefits from the younger woman's company and comforting embrace, Charleen gains inspiration from Vera's story, her 'deathbed' discourse triggers her decision to act, thus 'enabling narrative progression' (Gallagher, 2009,

p210) towards closure. This does not change the fact that in terms of the narrative this intergenerational dialogue was established on Vera's deathbed (figure 6, above) – no future is provided for the older character or this friendship. In the final scene of the film, Vera is already absent, while a new beginning is provided for Declan, Charleen and her sister. Ultimately, the death of the older lesbian is functional in terms of overarching narrative goals: achieving change in the life of the younger woman.

Vera's death can also be read in terms of the death of the 'other'. In terms of its visual representation, Vera's death provides an image of a purposeful, non-violent death to sooth the audience's fear of old age and dying. The purposefulness of Vera's road trip and her acceptance of impending death facilitate the viewer's appeasement. In addition, Vera's terminal illness (unspecified in the film) is depicted as 'nondisfiguring' and 'clean,' in accordance with the usual fictional depiction of cancer (Clark, 1999; Lederer, 2007), contributing to the idea of a peaceful death. Vera thus allows the spectators' fears to be projected outwards (Markson, 2003, p95), confirming our belief that 'others die, I do not' (Elias, 1985, p1). The fact that Vera is constructed as 'other' on three levels – in terms of gender, age and sexuality – further encourages this identification *against*, away from her.

Un/happy Endings: *If These Walls Could Talk 2*

As opposed to *Hold Back the Night*, in which Vera's lesbian identity is concealed until her coming out speech, in the first segment of *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, '1961', Edith (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abby (Marian Seldes) are presented as a couple from the start. Side by side, although

discreet, these two women become visible as lesbians, they have each other to 'be a lesbian with' (Cottingham, 1996, p27). The first minutes establish the harmony and love of their long-term relationship, showing them at the cinema and then at their house. Despite an initial image of their blissful existence, seven minutes into the film, Edith is transformed into a widow. Abby falls from a ladder, suffers a stroke and later in hospital passes away over night while Edith is waiting in the visitors' lounge. This is in accordance with the logic of the disappearing body of the ageing female character (Gallagher, 2009; Markson, 2003; Woodward, 2006).

Dana Heller argues that *If These Walls Could Talk 2* establishes 'a narrative of revolutionary progress and movement from invisibility and silence to visibility and agency' (2002, p86). In accordance with a narrative of social progress, '1961' is the starting point and has therefore to be presented as the most desolate situation. In order to illustrate a gradual improvement, the first narrative sets the scene of 'how things were' in a pre-Stonewall, pre-gay rights movement period. Its main objective is to illustrate the emotional, social and economical implications of, for instance, same-sex partners not being entitled to visiting rights at the hospital; and the lack of inheritance rights in case a death occurs. Whether or not this film portrays an illusionary progress as Carrie Stone suggests (2003),[73] the third and final story, '2000,' functions as the point of arrival, an illustration of 'how things are *now*' – suggesting that discrimination and inequality are a thing of the

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[73] Stone argues that: 'Right now, 7 out of 10 lesbians do not have simple estate planning documents. [...] Unfortunately, the episode was set in the 1950's and we are left with the impression that this kind of tragedy no longer happens. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are many real life stories about partners of lesbians who suffer needlessly because someone did not sign a few legal documents. Occasionally, stories like these make headlines, but more often they do not. It happens everywhere and every day' (2003, np).

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past. In terms of genre,[74] this is achieved through a progression from drama (social problem film; or social drama) to social-conscience/romance film in '1972' to (romantic) comedy in '2000,' the final segment.[75]

Three tragic events and unhappy endings are contained within this short narrative. The first is the unhappy ending of *The Children's Hour* (Wyler, 1961)[76] (intertextually alluded to), the second one is Abby's accident and death, and the third is the actual ending of '1961'. Each of these unhappy endings – accident, hospitalisation and death (for Abby) and loss of her partner and her home (for Edith) – can be read as functional. They allow the narrative of social progress to be more effective – social progress is only possible at the expense of Abby's death and Edith's 'disappearance.' In other words, even in a film with predominantly lesbian characters, the older lesbian is constructed as *'other'*.

As the ghosted lesbian theme is reiterated, this pervasiveness of the terminal illness and death storyline across decades, film genres and characters' age categories poses the question of the impact of unhappy endings in terms of identity politics in general and viewer engagement in particular.

The thematic choice that allows this narrative arch of progress is in compliance with the ageist narrative of decline. Subsequently, other elements contribute and accentuate Abby's and Edith's otherness in relation to Linda, Amy, Fran and Kal. Both narratives, '1972' and '2000,' finish with a 'happy ending' for their protagonists, while this is denied for the elderly

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[74] See Neale (2000, p113).
[75] Vanessa Redgrave's theatrical background on the one hand and Ellen DeGeneres' sit-com persona further accentuate these opposite genres.
[76] For a synopsis, see appendix 1.

couple (in the first segment). In addition (although as a consequence of the theme and genre of this segment), Abby and Edith, are represented in accordance with the asexual notion of old age, while the remaining characters in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* are portrayed as sexual and engage in sexual contact.

Despite the fact that the themes of illness, death and mourning can be seen as a normalising strategy, the regularity of the unhappy ending, whether for one character (Vera in *Hold Back the Night*) or both protagonists (Edith and Abby in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*), has significant implications in terms of identity politics. It has been argued that happy endings are profitable (Mellencamp, 1995, p36). Also, according to Neupert, they entice the audience by providing satisfaction and rewarding a 'worthy protagonist':

> The "happy ending" has become a cliché of the classical Hollywood cinema. It is often the goal of Hollywood stories to delight the spectator with the film's conclusion, rewarding the worthy protagonist and satisfying the desires of the audience by reinstating a secure and "proper" final situation. […] If the spectator can know the story resolution will be pleasureable [sic] as well as organically and casually rewarding, the cinema becomes a machine for enticing and then satisfying the audience.
>
> (1995, pp71-72)

Regarding this film, Ruby Rich expresses the wish for a happier ending for Edith and Abby, who from all the characters in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* are the only ones *not* 'worthy' of a happy ending:

> So forgive me for wishing *If These Walls Could Talk 2* had included a fourth story, one in which the Ellen and Sharon and Chloe and Michelle characters could discover Vanessa at their corner bar, introduce her to their friends, and start carpooling to get her out at night.
>
> (Rich, 2000, np)

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Rich's suggestion for an alternative ending, in a fourth story – featuring the characters Kal (Ellen DeGeneres) and Fran (Sharon Stone) and Amy (Chloë Sevigny) and Linda (Michelle Williams) (mentioned above) – also indicates a perceived lack of intergenerational communication. In *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, three age categories are represented – over sixty, early twenties and thirty-something – but are compartmentalised into separate narratives. Each age category is 'locked' within their own decade, separated by the intertitles '1961', '1972', '2000.'

The distance between old and young, past and present is further emphasised by the intertextual tragedy of *The Children's Hour* (1961). In '1961,' the axiom of the 'unhappy ending' becomes a continuum, established through interconnectedness of (diegetic) tragic events and the film as intertext. The unavoidability of an 'unhappy ending' is suggested by the analogy between the '1961' narrative and *The Children's Hour*. In the context of *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, Edith and Abby are simultaneously the audience of the unhappy ending of *The Children's Hour*, and the protagonists of their own unhappy ending.

This can be illustrated by a closer look at the opening scene. Following the opening credits, which feature documentary footage images illustrating moments of women's movement, gay rights activists etc, the first narrative segment is introduced. The stationary establishing shot showing the outside of the house – in which all the narratives are set – is superimposed with the intertitle '1961.' An abrupt cut brings us the first scene, which is actually a scene from the black and white film *The Children's Hour*.

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The scene shown is a central one, towards the end of the film, in which Martha (Shirley MacLaine) reveals that she has feelings for Karen (Audrey Hepburn). In her 'coming out' speech, Martha expresses her love and desire, while simultaneously characterising these as unnatural. Slowly, the camera pans back revealing a screen and rows of seats in a screening room. As Martha pronounces the words 'I did love you, I do love you,' a middle-aged heterosexual couple leaves the cinema – their offence establishes the predominant social attitude towards homosexuality in the 1960s. Only at this point are the protagonists introduced, as a close-up focuses on Edith and Abby sitting in the audience (figure 7, below). They are holding hands, tears running down Abby's face as she presses Edith's hand against her own cheek, seeking some comfort.

This public display of affection is a momentary lapse – their hands part, conscious of the remaining cinema audience. A group of teenagers sitting in the back rows, insensitive and amused (we are left to wonder if they are amused by Martha's revelation or by the old lesbians they spotted holding hands in the seats in front of them). The next scene cuts to the exterior of the cinema. The inclusion of this scene at the beginning of the first narrative of *If These Walls Could Talk 2* is significant. Those familiar with the plot of *The Children's Hour* know what follows. In the subsequent scene, Karen goes out for a walk and Martha commits suicide.[77]

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[77] Vito Russo refers to this as 'the first in a long series of suicides of homosexual screen characters' (1987, p139).

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Figure 7 – The older lesbian couple in the cinema: Edith (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abby (Marian Seldes) in the narrative segment '1961' of *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (Anderson, 2000)

The tragic ending of *The Children's Hour* was, according to Alison Darren, a heteronormative necessity of the time: 'Her suicide, unforgivable to a modern lesbian audience but essential for heterosexuals in 1961, is the tragedy required to end the film. What other ending could there possibly be?' (2000, p45). The unhappy ending of the '1961' segment has a similar functional requirement. According to the film's overall objective it allows a narrative of social progress. In the context of *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, the intertext of *The Children's Hour* contributes to the *mise-en-scène*, it establishes the initial melodramatic tone, which we return to after Abby's accident.

The cinema scene also illustrates a specific social and historical context. The cinema audience's reaction illustrates a specific decade, the 1960s, and the general attitude towards homosexuality. Martha's formulation of her

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feelings as 'unnatural' is thus in accordance with the medical discourse of the era. That Abby and Edith's behaviour has to be restrained due to the vigilant look of the teenagers sitting behind them, at the back of the cinema, is another indication of the socio-political climate and the necessity of passing as heterosexual friends, of staying in 'the closet'.

In addition, by introducing the protagonists as cinema-goers, affected by the images on screen, representation politics becomes central. Edith and Abby are introduced as a same-sex couple. Not only are they holding hands, there is an obvious empathy with the screen representation of same-sex love, and one character's (Martha) struggle to accept it. For these lesbians in the audience, Martha's death is not that of the 'other'. She is too close to home.

Finally, it addresses the knowing (contemporary) viewer – film scholars and/or gay male and lesbian viewers would probably recognise this scene as part of *The Children's Hour* – providing a presage of this story's development towards a similarly tragic ending. It thus establishes the genre of the '1961' segment itself and functions as a warning – there will be an unhappy ending. As they are leaving the cinema, Sam, the porter, asks them if they enjoyed the film and Abby replies 'Too much high drama for my taste – I like comedies better.' This answer stands as element of intertextual sarcasm, since this story itself will turn into drama.
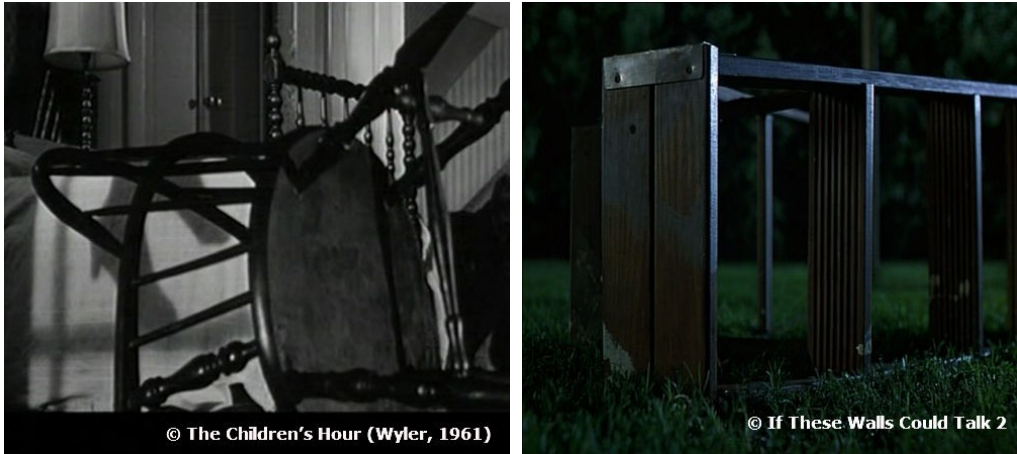
Figure 8 – Intextextually linked screenshots: the fallen chair in
The Children's Hour (Wyler, 1961, left) denoting suicide and the fallen ladder
implying a fatal accident in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* ('1961', right)

There is another intertextual reference that links *The Children's Hour* with *If These Walls Could Talk 2*. Comparing two screen shots (figure 8) a link between both unhappy endings is established. While the fallen chair (left) indicates Martha's suicide (in what has been identified as a conventional 'killing-off' practice for lesbian characters in film), the fallen ladder (right) confirms the concept of the frail old female body – in compliance with the concept of ageing as decline. The double definition as ghostly that results from the intersection of lesbian sexuality and old age is here visually presented.

Finally, there is the actual ending of '1961' and Edith's 'disappearance.' When I use the expression 'disappearance' I am alluding to the before mentioned 'logic of the disappearing female body' (Woodward, 2006, p163), while at the same time implying the actual disappearing of Edith's image in the last sequence of '1961' (figure 9). We can see Edith climbing up the steps putting back a bird's egg that fell out of the nest (the same steps where Abby fell off and suffered her accident). Heller reads the final

sequence in terms of Edith's desire to nurture (birds and eggs), confirming her position 'as a guardian of future life, great and small' (2002, p93).
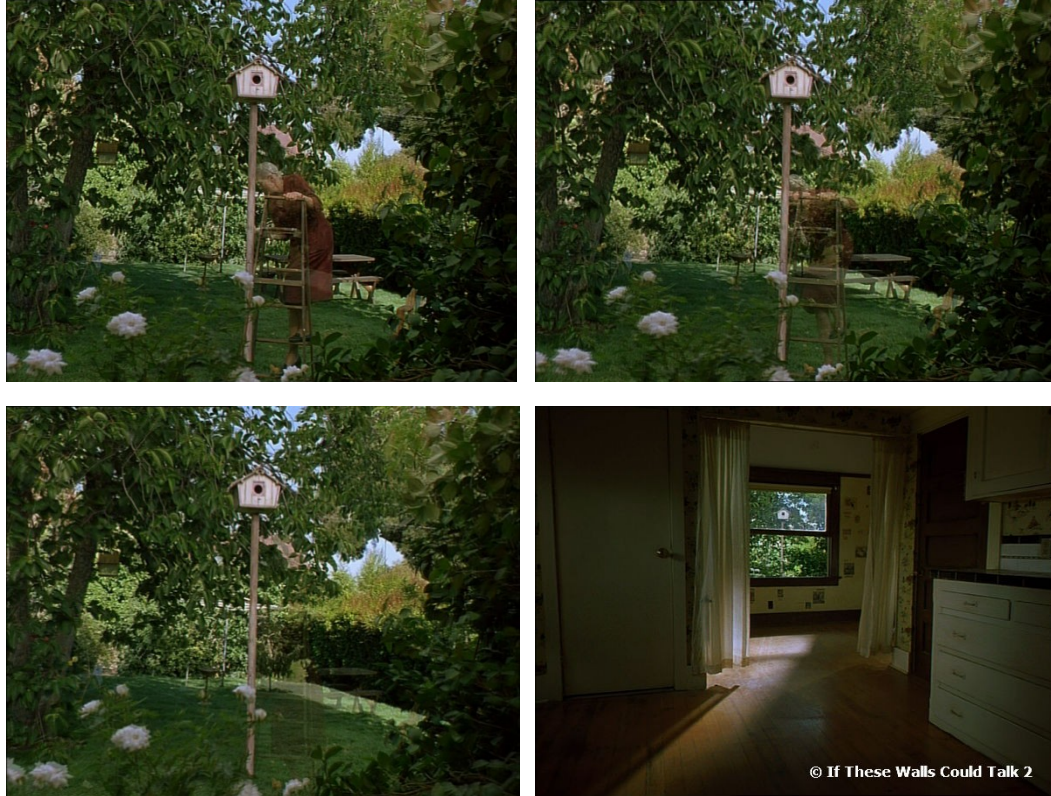
Figure 9 – Gradual dissolve: Edith's (Vanessa Redgrave) ghostly disappearance at the end of '1961', *If These Walls Could Talk 2*

This reading emphasises her role as nurturing older woman towards the younger generations of lesbian/ feminists that follow. I reject this interpretation and focus on this last scene as symbolising the ghosting of the older lesbian within this youth-centred lesbian film. As suggested throughout this chapter, the narrative of progress is only possible at the expense of the tragic events and the unhappy endings within this first sequence. Indeed as Keegan points out 'Edith is forced to surrender her home, literally disappearing from the *mise-en-scène*' (2006, p116). Once her image dissolves (as can be observed in the four sequential screenshots

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above), there is no trace left of an older lesbian woman and the remaining narrative sequences are in tune with the dictates of a youth-centred lesbian hypervisibility.

We could speculate, as Rich does, about possible alternative endings in accordance with the agenda of identity politics or intergenerational dialogue. Instead, let us consider the implications of unhappy endings in terms of political activism. In an article entitled 'Happiness and Queer politics' Sara Ahmed elaborates on the (im)possibility of happy endings in queer narratives (2009). Ahmed argues that, in the past, 'unhappy endings' were negotiated by lesbian and gay readers (Ahmed's analysis focuses on literary texts), in the sense that any image would be better than no image at all:

> The unhappy ending satisfies the censors whilst also enabling the gay and lesbian audiences to be satisfied; we are not obliged to "believe" in the unhappy ending by taking the ending literally, as "evidence" that lesbians and gays must turn straight, die or go mad. What mattered was the existence of "a new book about us."
>
> (2009, p1)

By suggesting that endings do not have to be taken literally, Ahmed is alluding to oppositional reading practices (in this context, imagining an alternative ending for an unsatisfactory narrative). As mentioned before, this has been documented as a common practice of lesbian viewers.[78] While Neupert (1995) suggested that happy endings provide audience satisfaction, Ahmed suggests that rather 'than reading unhappy endings as a sign of the withholding of a moral approval for queer lives, we would consider how unhappiness circulates within and around this archive, and

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[78] This concept of an actively involved audience has been similarly explored in terms of television and fan communities see Jenkins (1992).

what it allows us to do' (2009, p1). In the context of *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, unhappy endings are functional in establishing a narrative of social progress. Within this logic, the final narrative stands as evidence that socio-political change has been successful and equality has been achieved.[79] In this sense, the happy ending of '2000' is contra productive. As Ahmed argues regarding *If These Walls Could Talk 2*:

> the happy image in the end is of a white middle-class lesbian couple who are pregnant: they dance around their immaculate house, and everything seems to shimmer with its nearness to ordinary scenes of happy domesticity. Their happiness amounts to achieving relative proximity to the good life.
>
> (2009, p9)

To conclude this argument I would like to stress that the older lesbian is portrayed as the ageing *'other'* – mainly through the absence of a happy ending, but similarly through the themes of death and mourning as argued throughout this chapter. Whether or not unhappy endings can be seen as catalysts for political and social activism, given the recurrence of tragic lesbian storylines, Rich's fourth story (2000) would present a welcoming alternative. Abby's words ring true for many of us watching lesbian themed cinema: 'Too much high drama for my taste – I like comedies better.'

As many would agree, there is a certain comfort in watching happy endings, in enjoying the 'simple pleasures' (Henderson, 1999) that a typical (romantic) comedy provides. My final analysis in this chapter presents an alternative to lesbian stories with unhappy endings (although containing its fare share of tragic events). Despite not being a comedy, *The Shipping News* ends on a lighter and more positive note.

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[79] It should be noted that in terms of narrative resolution the first *If These Walls Could Talk* (1996) differs from *If these Walls Could Talk 2*. Although portraying different issues relating to abortion (right), both the first and the final narratives end in tragedy.

***The Shipping News*: 'Making a future!'**

> AGNIS: I don't believe in dwelling in the past.
> QUOYLE: No? Then what are we doing here?
> AGNIS: Making a future!
>
> *The Shipping News* (Hallström, 2001)

Agnis Hamm (Judi Dench) challenges the ghostly dimension associated to the figure of the widow. As can be deduced from the above dialogue, her character is not confined to the past, nor denied a future. Agnis is the only older lesbian character (she is in her mid to late sixties) who is represented beyond the terminal disease and/or widowhood plotline. Instead of an existence confined to experiences in the past, a present without prospects of a future, as appeared to be the norm in the films analysed in this chapter, Agnis is portrayed as a multi-dimensional character. Although introduced through the familiar theme of widowhood (the terminal illness theme is also indirectly driven at, as her partner died of leukaemia), the character is allowed a *temporal* dimension that includes past, present and future.[80] Neither does she embody a narrative of decline. Agnis' character enables 'a more nuanced consideration of ageing's possibilities and limitations' (Moglen, 2008, p299).

The transformative potential of an existence 'in time', is recognised by Butler, who argues that:

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[80] The notion of time, and of different temporal dimensions is relevant in age studies and in the following chapter will generate a discussion around the notion of a 'queer time' in a reading of *Notes on a Scandal*.

> Bodies are not inhabited as spatial givens. They are, in their spatiality, also underway in time: aging, altering shape, altering signification – depending on their interactions – and the web of visual, discursive, and tactile relations that become part of their historicity, their constitutive past, present, and future.
>
> As a consequence of being in the mode of becoming, and in always living with the constitutive possibility of becoming otherwise, the body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation.
>
> (2004, p217)

In this context, I would like to emphasise the relevance of older lesbian characters that present the 'possibility of becoming otherwise' (Butler, 2004, p217). While other characters analysed so far were presented according to conventional themes of the ghosted lesbian and the 'declining' older woman, Agnis becomes 'otherwise.' When Agnis first knocks at her nephew's door, introducing herself as his aunt, she is on her way to Newfoundland, but wishes to see her brother's (Quoyle's father's) ashes. At this point, Agnis is revealed as a complex character. Unnoticed, she quickly switches the ashes in her brother's urn for some she carried in her bag. With no trace of grief, we realise that this was her plan all along – the first step in her plan to defile her brother's ashes. As is revealed later, he had raped her as a teenager. Agnis keeps his ashes until the moment where she can put her plan into practice – she dumps the contents of the plastic bag into an outdoor toilet and urinates on them.

Agnis' past is constantly intersecting with her present, but she is not confined to an existence in the past. Similarly, although the themes of loss and mourning are associated to this character, the role of the widow is not her sole function. As the narrative proceeds, her character is allowed

interaction with another woman and the prospect of a new relationship is presented.

In terms of her identity as an older woman, Agnis occupies the norm as a pensioner, but simultaneously reworks the norm – she decides to 'de-retire' and set up her upholstery business in Newfoundland. For this character, the possibility exists to develop throughout the narrative. In addition to being central to the narrative development, being the agent bringing about change in Quoyle and his daughter's lives, this character is constructed as whole. Agnis is constituted by elements of her past, which inevitably have an impact on her present, as well as provided with prospects of a future existence.

Agnis challenges the paradigm of the ghosted lesbian. There are three moments in particular which, although reiterating the themes of terminal illness and mourning, do not marginalise this character in terms of her experience of loss. These moments provide the viewer with information regarding Agnis' past, present and future and I read these as an example of the surpassing of the paradigm of the ghosted older lesbian.

The first of these moments consists of an outdoor scene. Agnis is sitting on the cliffs outside her house, she is reading a book, 'Robert Burns,' she declares as Quoyle approaches. Noticing his aunt's solemnity, Quoyle understands she is also in mourning. 'Someone gave that to you. Someone that you're missing', he ventures. Agnis reveals that she has indeed lost someone, 'Six years ago today. Leukaemia. We weren't married, but that's a technicality.' Quoyle advances for an embrace, but Agnis turns away. At this point, although Agnis identifies as a widow she does not reveal the

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name (and gender) of her partner. All we know is that she understands Quoyle's experience of loss. This shared experience of mourning, is one of the elements that contributes to the fact that in *The Shipping News* the lesbian character is *not* singled out. Indeed, most of the characters in this film are positioned as liminal, they are on a journey to Newfoundland – both a new beginning and a return to origins (home of their ancestors). The loss of a loved one is an experience shared by Agnis and Quoyle as well as by Wavey (Julianne Moore).[81] The conventional divide established (through thematic and storylines) between heterosexual and lesbian, young and old characters is absent. Likewise, the opportunity to establish a new relationship is not restricted to the younger heterosexual couple – Quoyle and Wavey – as the prospect of companionship is similarly provided for Agnis.

In a second moment, which could be defined as the 'coming out' scene, Agnis reveals her sexual identity. Quoyle confesses he know about her experience of rape as a young girl. Agnis breaks down in tears. Identifying with her vulnerability, Quoyle asks whether it is possible to find happiness after such traumatic events. As an answer, Agnis takes out a photograph (see figure 10, below) and 'comes out' to her nephew: 'Her name was Irene. The love of my life.' Quoyle says 'You look happy.' At this moment, her lesbian identity and her identity as a widow converge and the association to the theme of *past*, illness and mourning is established.

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[81] Agnis' character gains a new dimension when considering that Judi Dench herself had recently lost her husband. *The Shipping News* was filmed only months after Michael Williams died of lung cancer (Watson-Smyth, 2001). In an interview, Dench mentions how she was immersed in work the months that followed her husband's death (Caro, 2002).

Just as in *Hold Back the Night*, where Vera introduces her travel companions to her deceased partner by an old photograph (see figure 10, left), in *The Shipping News* a photograph is used as coming-out 'prop'. According to Annette Kuhn and Kirsten McAllister, the photograph lends a ghostly quality to the moment it captures:

> Above all, the photograph is widely held to be a record, a piece of evidence that something happened at some time, somewhere – in the time and place in front of the camera. Unlike cinema, the photograph holds this recorded moment in stillness, capturing and offering up for contemplation a trace of something lost, lending it a ghostly quality.
>
> (2006, p1)

The photograph within the film provides more than nostalgic memories, evidence of 'something lost;' these photographs facilitate the revelation of the characters' sexual identity. They represent departed loved ones that evoke the memory of a former life of happiness and companionship, while bringing simultaneously the prospect of mortality to that present moment; the photograph 'evokes both memory and loss, both a trace of life and the prospect of death' (Sturken, 1999, p178).

Figure 10 – The photograph as ghostly presence: Vera's late partner Jo (*Hold Back the Night*, left) and Agnis and her late partner Irene (*The Shipping News*, Hallström, 2001)

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Thus, it seems that through the photograph, concepts of the past, mourning and the prospect of mortality are evoked. Kuhn and McAllister note that

> the photograph confronts us with the fleeting nature of our world and reminds us of our mortality. […] the photograph can disturb the present moment and the contemporary landscape with troubling or nostalgic memories and with forgotten, or all too vividly remembered, histories.
>
> (2006, p1)

The difference is that in this film, Agnis is not confined to widowhood and an association to a past. The difference between the colour and the black-and-white photographs further supports this idea; as opposed to Vera, Agnis' presence is located in the here and now (figure 10, right). In fact, in a third moment, the formulaic theme is surpassed and the possibility of companionship and happiness is located in the present, instead of confined to the past. In a brief scene, Agnis is depicted sitting in bed next to her colleague Mavis (Nancy Beatty, see figure 11).

© The Shipping News (Hallström, 2001)

Figure 11 – A glimpse into domestic bliss: Agnis (Judi Dench) and Mavis (Nancy Beatty) in *The Shipping News* (Hallström, 2001)

A storm is raging outside, emphasising the peaceful, domestic setting in which Agnis and Mavis are placed. Unlike the scene of brief domestic bliss in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, this scene suggests the prospects of a new relationship, confirming Agnis' plan of 'making a future'.

Conclusion

In this chapter I revisited Castle's paradigm of the apparitional lesbian (1993) and established the continuity of the lesbian as a ghost in contemporary images of older lesbian women. I argue that this definition as ghostly derives mainly from a reiterative thematic of terminal illness, death and mourning. By embodying narratives of ageing as decline, the characters analysed here assume the function of the ageing *'other'* (Markson, 2003), against whom the audience can position themselves as whole. Their function is to 'disappear' (Woodward, 2006) from heteronormative and youth-centred cultural representations. I explored how the intersection of the identity *old* with the identity *lesbian* results in images that 'disappear' on account of either of two modes of representation: 'the logic of the disappearing female body' (Woodward, 2006, p163) or the tragic lesbian death storyline (Russo, 1987).

I argued that the character Vera, in *Hold Back the Night*, is ghosted through her terminal illness and death. She is positioned as 'other' in terms of her association to the past – the experience of love is located in a distant past – and the fact that she is 'killed off' negating the character a prospect of a future. The possibility of developing as an individual and finding happiness and love is reserved for the younger heterosexual characters.

Similarly, the older characters in *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (in the '1961' segment) are marginalised in terms of this narrative arch of social progress. Edith and Abby's unhappy ending allows the narrative to evolve into a comedy setting and a happy ending. I argued that this affirmative (identity politics based) strategy is achieved at the expense of a 'positive' portrayal of the older lesbian characters. The intersection of three events and unhappy endings reiterates the thematic of the ghosted lesbian, in particular the final sequence in which Edith's image literally dissolves on screen. This means that the older lesbian characters are positioned as 'other' within a film containing younger characters 'entitled' to a happy ending/happy endings.

Finally, to counteract the representation of the older lesbian as ill, dying (or dead), I present *The Shipping News* as an alternative. This film challenges, through Agnis (Dench), the motif of the lesbian as ghosted widow. This character is three dimensional and entitled to an existence in the past and in the present and has prospects of happiness and companionship in a near future.

In the following chapter, I will turn to the paradigm of the monstrous lesbian as it emerges with additional layers of otherness and abjection when intersected with the identity 'old.' The film used as a case study for this analysis is *Notes on a Scandal*. In this film, the cultural construction of the ageing *'other'* intersects with abject lesbian desire as embodied by Barbara Covett (Judi Dench).

Given the limited number of older lesbian characters in film it is significant that Judi Dench is a recurring presence. In Chapter Six, I explore

the possibility of expanding lesbian possibilities by appropriating other of Dench's roles. Reading her star persona and transgressive film characters I will consider opportunities for lesbian interpretative strategies targeted at an older actress and/or older female characters. This strategy aims to challenge the tendency to appropriate fictional characters based on their physical strength and muscular (youthful) bodies and consider alternative cinematic images that are 'lesbianisable.'

Chapter Five

The Older Lesbian as Monstrous ('Other')

Introduction: From Ghostly to Monstrous

In the previous chapter, I analysed images of the ghostly lesbian. I explored how the themes of disease, death and mourning position the older lesbian characters as 'other.' As argued, possibilities of representation for older lesbian characters were thus restricted to images of illness, death, and widowhood. A variation within this thematic was found in Agnis (played by Judi Dench) in *The Shipping News*. Whereas in the previous chapter a multiplicity of characters, mainly in secondary roles, was discussed in relation to common, reiterated themes, in the present chapter *Notes on a Scandal* constitutes the central text and a more in-depth analysis will be provided. The protagonist, Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) is, indeed, far from ghostly or incorporeal.

Notes on a Scandal is based on the homonymous novel by Zoë Heller (2004)[82] and was adapted for the screen by playwright Patrick Marber (2006) with a soundtrack by Phillip Glass. It was directed by Richard Eyre, multiple award-winning theatre director, TV and film producer (Miller, 1999), who previously directed Judi Dench's performance in *Iris* (2001). An extensive use of voice-over establishes the link between Heller's literary first-person participant narrator and Eyre's adaptation of Barbara on screen.

Given the popularity of *Notes on a Scandal*,[83] Barbara Covett can be considered the most visible representation of a non-heterosexual older woman in recent mainstream film (in both UK and US productions). The fact that Barbara, as a twenty-first century creation, is reminiscent of cultural

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[82] Published in the United States with the title *What Was She Thinking? Notes On A Scandal*.
[83] *Notes on a Scandal*, partly financed and distributed by Fox Searchlight, co-produced by DNA Films was a box office success. Charles Gant (2007) shows how *Notes on a Scandal* was successfully marketed to two different audiences, maximising its box office success – the film grossed £1,141,364 on opening weekend.

texts that precede the gay-rights-liberation movements of the 1960s raises questions about the pervasiveness and continuation of certain cultural images.[84] In other words, continuity is established, between the types of representation characteristic of a pre-gay-liberation era and a 2006 film based on a contemporary literary text. This collision of former models of lesbian representation with contemporary audiences – that can be assumed to be familiar with a more diverse type of texts, including transgressive images of new queer cinema – creates a range of interpretation possibilities. If, as suggested by Patricia White, every viewing has the capacity to evoke the viewer's 'unconscious and conscious past viewing experience' (1999, p197) what meanings congregate around Barbara? In this chapter, I will consider how different reading strategies can open-up alternative interpretative possibilities. A character like Barbara can generate diverse meanings. I intend to pursue two particular readings in this chapter, one emphasising the 'return' of the monstrous lesbian and another one seeking out the elements that allow us to consider Barbara as a queer character.

Revisiting the figure of the monstrous lesbian 'other', Barbara is first analysed in terms of an identity politics perspective (through which Barbara can be considered a 'negative' image – comprising stereotypes of age, gender and sexuality). By focusing on age as an additional identity marker I wish to explore that same-sex desire becomes (once again) *abject* and the desiring individual becomes *'other'*. Indeed, in addition to the motifs of the

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[84] There are similarities between Barbara Covett and Mrs Denvers in *Rebecca* (Hitchcock, 1940) or Judith Fellows in *The Night of the Iguana* (Huston, 1964). In addition, *Notes on a Scandal* can be compared to *The Killing of Sister George* (1968) as one reviewer notices (Torrance, 2007).

'lesbian stalker' or 'the sadistic or neurotic repressed woman' (Weiss, 1992, p1), Barbara, as I will further explore later in this chapter, seems to combine characteristics of several familiar ageist figures that commonly circulate in Western cultures. For instance, Baba Copper suggests figures such as 'the Wicked Old Witch [...] the Old Bad Mother [...] the Little Old Lady' (Copper, 1997, pp121-122), as key ageist configurations.

As previously argued, there have been two main approaches to the lesbian as monstrous/abject: one is the identity politics approach which conceives these images as 'negative' stereotypes (Becker *et al.*, 1995, p26; Sheldon, 1980, p5; Weiss, 1992, p1; Wilton, 1994a, p2); the other is a queer studies approach, which appropriates these representations as disruptive of the hetero-patriarchal establishment and celebrates them as transgressive and empowering (see: Barootes, 2007; Jermyn, 1996; Sears, 1992). The identity category *age* enhances the stereotype – within contemporary culture, age is constructed as abject and thus doubly constitutes the older, lesbian woman as marginalised, abject 'other' (Creed, 1993; Kaplan, 1999; Shildrick, 2002).

Just as dangers of pollution (Douglas, 1966) are determined according to certain hegemonic principles, and the ensuing domains of the abject determine what is considered the norm and what, or who, is positioned as 'other' (Butler, 1999), the construction of the monster is determined by culture and its prejudices (Cohen, 1996). Barbara becomes monstrous as she desires beyond the social and sexual norms and her desire is transgressive. As Shildrick posits 'any being who traverses the liminal spaces that evade classification takes on the potential to confound

normative identity, and monsters paradigmatically fulfil that role' (2002, p5). In contrast to the liminal states that I explored in relation to the ghosted lesbian in the previous chapter (from illness to death, carer to widow), in *Notes on a Scandal* the character Barbara can be seen as traversing diverse liminal states of being. Barbara's liminality (Kay *et al.*, 2007) is a result of her own conflicting perception of her *self* as well as a result of labels others attribute to her. The former becomes evident in my analysis of the process by which Barbara expels abject lesbian elements from within her sense of self. The latter occurs when Barbara is urged to confess.

The pressure *to confess* that permeates this film is reminiscent of Foucault's arguments on the discursive construction of sexuality (1976/1998), while Barbara's refusal to *identify* functions as a silent speech act (Sedgwick, 1991). As opposed to the 'coming out' moments present in each of the films previously analysed, in *Notes on a Scandal* it is this denial to *confess* lesbianism that provides the opportunity for a queer reading.

In this chapter, a queer appropriation of Barbara will provide an alternative perspective, in order to consider the possibilities of empowerment. Transgressive sexual behaviour is seen as libratory in the context of queer theory – however, this theory's focus on young, white, gay male individuals (Rich, 2004) (and fictional characters in an essentially youth and male-centred new queer cinema 'moment') can be seen as problematic when carried over to an older, female character. It is through the identity of the 'spinster' and a version of 'romantic friendship' that Barbara emerges as a queer figure.

Identity (Politics): Is she, or isn't she? *Notes on a Scandal's* **Reverse-reverse Discourse**

Notes on a Scandal presents a major challenge to a reading from an identity politics position. No 'positive' images are provided in this film, either in terms of ageing femininities or the older lesbian sexuality. Several reviews (discussed below) refer to the return of the 'evil lesbian' stereotype. In this first section, I will approach this film text from an identity politics perspective, considering the meanings arising from a 'positive' images position. I begin with a discussion of several reviews of *Notes on a Scandal*, focusing on the reviewers' reading of Barbara as a lesbian or non-lesbian. This identification is essential in the context of the representation of Barbara Covett. The question 'is she, or isn't she (a lesbian)?' underlies both the layered creation of the film character (a literary character by Heller, adapted into a screenplay by Marber, performed by Dench, directed by Eyre) and the reception of this character by re/viewers. The question itself, much more than the answer, allows a return to Foucault's notion of the discourse formation of subject positions (identity) through the act of confession (speech acts) and/ or the empowering formulation of a 'reverse discourse' ('coming out' narrative) in his *History of Sexuality* (1976/1998).

In the previous chapter I analysed older female characters who self-identified as lesbians – either through their relationships or actual 'coming out' narratives – and I highlighted the importance of the 'coming out' stories, relevant in the context of those films in terms of the moment in which the identity marker 'old' combines with the identity marker 'lesbian'. In *Notes on a Scandal*, a situation is created in which, on the one hand, a lesbian reading of the character Barbara Covett is textually suggested – by her own

characterisation and behaviour as well as insinuations of her friends and family – while, on the other hand, Barbara herself refuses to identify as a lesbian. Foucault's concept of 'reverse discourse' (1976/1998, p101), in the form of self-identification through a 'coming-out' narrative, is central to identity politics and is one of the concepts evoked in the present analysis.

Although presented as complex and multifaceted (in terms of her intentions, motivations and, ultimately, her sexual identity), Barbara's 'true' sexuality emerges as a mystery to be uncovered. The question 'is she or isn't she?' is textually constructed as a 'never-ending demand for truth […] to extract the truth of sex' (Foucault, 1976/1998, p77). I will consider how Barbara is continuously confronted and coerced into confessing, looking at a selection of scenes.

The need to define Barbara, to establish a ('true') identity becomes a central concern from the audience's point of view. This becomes evident in the extra-diegetic discourses on *Notes on a Scandal*: film reviews and online forums. The re/viewer (including the present author) is compelled into investigating Barbara's (repressed) sexual orientation and/or psychosis in order to interpret the film.

Re/viewing the Monstrous (Lesbian)

Ambiguity can be identified within the two categories of discourses constructed around Barbara. The first type of discourse emphasises her chronic loneliness and (consequent) delusion as the reason for her psychotic behaviour. Most of the official discourses on *Notes on a Scandal* can be included in this category. Constituted by cast interviews, promotional

trailers and so forth, it avoids the issue of lesbianism, focusing instead on the character's acute loneliness and her desperate attempt to establish any human contact.[85] The following excerpts from cast interviews illustrate the official tone regarding Barbara Covett's sexual identity. Judi Dench reveals in an interview that she knows several people like Barbara, the character she plays:

> A very, very lonely person who craves affection and to have any friend of some kind. I think there are a lot of people out there just like that who have been lonely all their lives and dream of friendship.
>
> (Tapley, 2006)

Similarly, Cate Blanchett rejects one interviewer's suggestion that the film emphasised the source novel's '"lesbian" undercurrent' (Porton, 2007) with the following remark: 'I don't think Barbara would use any label to define her sexuality. I find it genuinely ambiguous. There's an overwhelming, intense need for connection, though, that Sheba simply can't reciprocate' (Porton, 2007). While I have to agree that Barbara would not use such a label, I read this as adding to the queer potential, as I discuss later in this chapter.

Several reviews assume a similar tone, carefully avoiding the word *lesbian*. Thus, for instance, Barbara is defined as a 'treacherously lonely spinster' (Jones, 2007) or 'lonely desperate teacher' (Richards, 2006). 'Spinster' is a culturally charged word (Cavanagh, 2006; Sandfield and Percy, 2003) – it connotes a sexist ideology, an ageist double standard in terms of singleness, and finally carries the stigma of being 'unusual or deviant' (Sandfield and Percy, 2003). In other words, a kind of 'closeted'

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[85] According to Fox Searchlight UK's director Anna Butler, two different TV commercials were made – one targeted to an 'older, more conservative' audience and one where the 'sex bit, the scandal, the drama' was played up (Gant, 2007). The former highlighted the film's pedigree: 'Judi giving the performance of a lifetime' (Gant, 2007). This duality contributes to the ambiguity of this character's identity.

discourse is created, one that avoids the l-word, while, nonetheless suggesting a deviancy from the norm.

The contradictions arising from the reviews stem from a similarly ambiguous 'play' around the question 'is she, isn't she?' maintained throughout the film. Thus, the word lesbian is never used, but ever-present. A good example is the opposition between the two types of discourse around Barbara, the one represented by Cate Blanchett's above-mentioned interview and the director's own interpretation. During the director's commentary on the DVD edition, Richard Eyre admits that a 'stalker motif' was chosen to represent Barbara and that she develops an 'adoration bordering on obsession' for Sheba. Furthermore, Eyre mentions that this character's 'passionate friendships' and her 'wild sexual jealousy' will be understood as *lesbian* by the viewer, although Barbara herself 'wouldn't admit to any sexual interest' as she refuses any 'lesbian element', denying it to others and herself (Eyre, 2006).

This ambiguity results from the adaptation process and is sustained by the director's choices. Heller admits that some of the alterations made to her novel in Marber's script change the core message (Shakespeare, 2007; Thorpe, 2006). In the film adaptation, Barbara is 'more overtly lesbian and more monstrous than in her original novel' (Shakespeare, 2007). In one interview Heller reveals

> The book is partly a kind of defense of the post-menopausal woman, particularly women who reach a certain age without being married and acquiring property [...]. If I've succeeded in the book at all, you should have some sympathy for this character, even though she's a bit nutty.
> (Cohen, 2007)

It is in these fissures arising between the source novel and the film adaptation, that this film's underlying misogynist, homophobic and ageist undertones emerge. As Heller's comments regarding the adaptation of her novel suggest, certain choices made, first by the scriptwriter, then by the director (for instance, the admission that Barbara was portrayed as a stalker, a motif emphasised by Philip Glass' soundtrack), have to be regarded as ideologically determined, not purely artistically informed.

What I am trying to argue is that Barbara is constructed within a misogynist, homophobic and ageist framework. Inevitably, she becomes an 'unlikable' character. Textually, structures of sympathy and engagement with this character are not facilitated. Whether these predetermined/ preferred alignments impede a transgressive appropriation of the (queer) monster remains to be investigated.

Regarding Heller's admission that the reader should feel 'some sympathy for this character, even though she's a bit nutty' (Cohen, 2007), the question arises whether the film adaptation allows the author's intended engagement with Barbara. Heller's novel (2004) corresponds to a first person participant-narrator mode (the notes correspond to Barbara's diary); the reader has access to the events only from Barbara's perspective. As the story progresses, what at first seemed a truthful account of 'the scandal' becomes an unreliable narrator's account of the events and one which she actually set in motion. This realisation is slow, as the reader is perfectly aligned with the narrator's point of view.

With her transformation from an unreliable first-person participant-narrator to film co-protagonist in *Notes on a Scandal*, there is a more

immediate shift in focalisation, resulting from the visual medium of the film. Barbara's interaction with other characters results in a change of focalisation, despite the voice-over monologues, which for most part recreate her diary's words. A complete immersion into Barbara's world view is lost. It would seem that the audience is torn between pitying the lonely, desperate older woman and distancing itself from this character's obsessive behaviour. Later in this chapter I will consider whether, against this grain of textually constructed sympathy structures, a transgressive appropriation of Barbara Covett's inappropriate behaviour is possible.

Another group of review/ers classify Barbara as a lesbian (Honeycutt, 2006; Kauffmann, 2007; Torrance, 2007). Barbara is referred to as a 'history teacher in a middle school who is a closet lesbian' (Kauffmann, 2007), 'an older, unfulfilled lesbian' (Torrance, 2007), a 'lesbian protagonist' (Buchanan, 2007), whose interest in Sheba 'springs from a strong Sapphic impulse' (Honeycutt, 2006). In specific LGBT publications such as *AfterEllen* (Lo, 2006) and *The Advocate* (Buchanan, 2007), the reviews emphasise the stereotypical representation of the 'evil lesbian'. While Malinda Lo argues that 'all of the stereotypical qualities of the psychotic lesbian stalker are laid upon the character of Barbara Covett' (2006), Kyle Buchanan sees her character as a 'bracing alternative' (2007). The tensions between an identity politics and a queer theory approach are evident, ranging from a critique of Barbara as a 'negative' image (Lo, 2006) to possibilities of queer appropriation (Buchanan, 2007). This latter reading is one I will expand on later in this chapter, connecting elements that allow a queer reading to viewer positions that engage with this character's transgressive behaviour.

For now let us return to an exploration of specific elements within *Notes on a Scandal* that suggest a return to pre-1990s paradigms of representing lesbians in film. In the previous chapter I argued that these elements comprised a ghosted notion of the older lesbian through storylines of terminal illness (and widowhood). I suggested that these storylines stand in for the 'killing off' mechanisms so often used to remove (the threat of) lesbian characters within a narrative. In *Notes on a Scandal* it is the motif of the predatory, monstrous lesbian that establishes the return to former paradigms of the lesbian in film. This motif is sustained by elements of the 'psychothriller' as one reviewer observed (Chang, 2006), for instance, the 'sinister, weblike repetitions of Philip Glass' score' (Chang, 2006) which emphasise the idea of threat.

According to the textually constructed reading, Barbara is recognisable as the stereotypical representation of the neurotic, sadistic and repressed lesbian (Sheldon, 1980, p12; Weiss, 1992, p1) and/or the 'treacherously lonely spinster' (Jones, 2007). The way Barbara is represented resembles the following description Raymond Berger provides of the older lesbian according to 'popular perception':

> The older lesbian […] is lonely because younger lesbians find her unattractive. Despite this, she attempts unsuccessfully to seduce them, but soon finds herself without family and friends, bitter until death.
> (1982, p237)

If that was the generalised perception of older lesbian women in the 1980s, in *Notes on a Scandal* this image is re-enacted unerringly by Barbara Covett. The continuity of this familiar stereotype is recognised by

one reviewer, who associates *Notes on a Scandal* to *the* other older lesbian in film history in the opening paragraph:

A film unsparingly details the breakdown of an older, unfulfilled lesbian. Facing problems at work and the prospect of growing old alone, the vindictive hag preys on attractive younger women. No, I'm not talking about the 1968 cult classic "The Killing of Sister George." This is the recently released critical hit "Notes on a Scandal."

(Torrance, 2007)

The witty opening of Torrance's review is possible due to elements which link Barbara to a notion of repressed lesbianism that seems out of place in a 2006 film text. Charles Derry, who reads *Notes on a Scandal* in terms of its elements that evoke the 'sixties horror-of-personality films' (2009, p196), suggests that there are other anachronistic elements in this film. Derry posits: the 'sociological irony of *Notes on a Scandal* is that in 2006, Barbara's sexual repression is needlessly archaic. If only she could allow herself to enter a gay club or embrace her lesbian identity [...] Barbara would not be destined for the tragic end we can all too clearly anticipate' (2009, p197). Derry's observation regarding the representation of lesbianism corroborates my argument regarding a return to earlier paradigms of lesbian representability.

Barbara's tragic end is to be destined to relive the same plot over and over again in an endless pursuit of companionship, only to be rebuked by one woman after the other, first Jennifer, then Sheba (and, as can be anticipated, Annabelle). This end is inevitable due to this film's 'archaic' conception of lesbianism, presenting same-sex desire as something to be denied, to be repressed (from Barbara's perspective) or as something to be mocked (from Sheba's perspective).

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This construction derives in part from the intersection of these 'dated' perceptions of lesbian sexuality with common ageist figures of the older woman in cultural representations. Barbara is, and here I return to Copper's inventory of 'mythical prototypes' (1997, p121), simultaneously 'the Wicked Old Witch with unnatural powers,' 'the Old Bad Mother with neurotic power needs' and 'the Little Old Lady, ludicrously powerless' (1997, p121). Her 'unnatural powers' (over Sheba) derive from Barbara's discovery of Sheba's secret affair with an underage student, giving her the power to manipulate Sheba into being a devoted friend 'forever in [her] debt.' She is positioned as the (old bad) mother figure caring for Sheba only to satisfy her own 'neurotic power needs.' Finally, Barbara also emerges as the 'little old lady' once her control over Sheba vanishes. She appears 'ludicrously powerless' in particular in the scene where Sheba physically attacks her and verbally abuses her (discussed below).

The film, as well as allowing diverse readings, also generates enough ambiguity in relation to Barbara's representation to divide reviewers. By posing the question 'is she or isn't she (obsessed, a stalker, a repressed lesbian)?', which echoes throughout the film, viewers are thus invited to partake in this 'investigation' into the 'truth' about Barbara. As Barbara becomes one of the mysteries to be uncovered, the act of confession turns into part of the interrogation of Barbara as a suspect who does not fit commonly available categories of sexual identity. Here Cohen's premise regarding the monster applies: 'the monster resists any classification' (1996, p7).

Confess or be Made to Confess

One *Leitmotif* in *Notes on a Scandal* is the act of confessing and it resonates throughout the film, although with different inflections. It emerges from the beginning, as Barbara characterises herself as the *confidante*, keeper of secrets. A close-up of Barbara sitting on a park bench accompanies the opening lines 'People have always trusted me with their secrets' then there is a cut to a close-up of Barbara's hand writing those same words in her diary. As the voice-over continues, 'But who do I trust with mine? You, only you,' the camera moves along a row of chronologically ordered diaries she has completed over the years.

The confessional theme runs throughout the film, as I will illustrate next. Barbara is the *confidante* and, as opposed to other characters' blunt confessions about personal areas in their lives, she keeps her secrets wrapped in mystery. Foucault's (1976/1998) idea of the act of confession as a process of formulating sexual categories, of mapping the truth about the individual through their sexuality becomes evident in this film. *Notes on a Scandal*, as I argued in terms of the reviews above, impels viewers to seek the 'truth about [her] sex' (Foucault, 1976/1998, p57) as if this 'truth' would provide guidance to determine the il/legitimacy of our allegiances to Barbara. There emerges a 'need to know' in accordance with the link between sexuality and truth Foucault established in his analysis of discursive formations around sex (Foucault, 1976/1998, p56).

Barbara is first presented as the confidante (in keeping with the character's self-definition as such) in a scene where Barbara is invited for lunch with Sheba's family. After lunch they retreat for coffee and, to

Barbara's surprise, Sheba volunteers intimate information about her marriage, even though they only recently met: 'It's a particular trait of the privileged: immediate incautious intimacy', Barbara (in voice-over) observes, and she concludes: 'She was utterly candid; a novice confessing to the mother superior.' This theme of the novice and mother superior is continued in a further act of confession. Once Barbara finds out about Sheba's affair with Steven, she demands: 'You must inform me of everything', 'Tell me all.' The confession scene is intersected with lengthy flashbacks of what happened. Sheba's desire for 'absolution' is expressed through her declaration 'I desperately wanted to confess to you'.

A third moment of confession involves a colleague, Brian, who confesses he has feelings for Sheba. Barbara assures him that everything he says will be kept 'in strictest confidence.' It is in this exact moment that Barbara uses the opportunity to end Sheba's affair with Steven once and for all – she discloses the information about Sheba's affair with her student in the hope that Brian will spread the rumour.

I highlight these confessional acts, as it is in their context that Barbara's silence becomes unacceptable. Barbara remains resistant to any attempt to extract a confession from her. Barbara's refusal to 'formulate the uniform truth of sex' (Foucault, 1976/1998, p69), as Foucault formulates, leads to greater suspicion of her family and colleagues, who 'demand that sex speak the truth' (Foucault, 1976/1998, p69), her truth. It is in Barbara's interaction with other characters that this need to *confess* – to identify – is most pertinent. Barbara's refusal to confess can be articulated through another of Foucault's fundamental concepts, which is linked to the act of confessing

(and thus adopting a subject position). The concept in question is the articulation of a 'reverse discourse'[86] through which the lesbian can speak on her own behalf, by taking up the identity *lesbian* as a self-proclaimed label, rather than a medical term ascribed to her. This idea can be placed at the centre of identity politics as suggested by Lloyd: 'This is where 'reverse' discourses are significant. Here the terms of a discourse are reversed in order to signify in a different way, perhaps to affirm that which in another mode is negated or proscribed' (2005, p99).

One first moment in which Barbara is invited to confess is in a family setting. Staying at her sister's over Christmas, Barbara is asked about her friend Jennifer. She replies that Jennifer moved away from London and no longer was a teacher at her school. Later that evening, her sister demonstrates genuine concern, and, in an attempt to incite Barbara to reveal more about her relationships, inquires 'Is there anyone else? Someone who's special?'. Instead of following her sister's invitation to 'come out,' as the sympathetic question seems to indicate, Barbara dismisses her with the retort 'I don't know what you mean' and meets her sister with a defiant, cold look (figure 12).

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[86] As mentioned before, Foucault referred to a specific moment in the history of medical science – sexology – at which the 'the formation of a "reverse" discourse' became possible, 'homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf' (1976/1998, p101).

Figure 12 – Barbara (Judi Dench) refuses to *confess* to her
sister (*Notes on a Scandal*, Eyre, 2006)

In an abrupt cut, the following scene portrays Sheba and Steven having
outdoor sex, thus making explicit what had been silenced in the previous
dialogue – sex, sexuality and illicit sexual desire. Moreover, Barbara's
disavowal of someone else 'special' rings particularly false when juxtaposed
to Sheba's orgasmic moans in the following scene.

Barbara refuses to 'come out'. Reading Barbara as lesbian is problematic
because, despite evidence of a physical longing and a sexual interest in
Sheba, the foundation of identity politics is a proud assumption of one's
sexual identity. In this context, the act of 'coming out' is generally regarded
as a positive achievement of accepting ones identity. *Grov et al.* explain
how negative and positive contexts of 'coming out' have to be recognised
(2006, p116).

In the context the discourse presented in *Notes on a Scandal*, Barbara's
refusal to 'come out' can be seen as subversive, as a defence mechanism
against prejudice. Jagose notes how the 'coming out' narrative marks the
entrance into the mechanisms of power (1994, pp8-9). The derogatory

power of labels is evident in the following list of expressions directed at Barbara: 'crone', 'dyke', 'vampire', 'bitter old virgin', 'freak'. These names are negatively charged with accusations of perversity, denoting a combination of sexism, homophobia and ageism. Against the succession of 'names' being attributed to her, she refuses to name her/self (her desire).

In another, more aggressive confrontation, Barbara is once more incited to confess. In Foucault's words, there is a 'never-ending demand for truth: it is up to us to extract the truth of sex' (1976/1998, p77). Once Sheba's affair with an underage student becomes public knowledge, Barbara is accused of being the 'confidant of a criminal'. She is called into the headmaster's (Michael Maloney) office and submitted to an interrogation: 'Now, tell me about your "friendship" with Mrs Hart' (note how this scene resembles a police interrogation: figure 13).

Figure 13 – The interrogation: the Headmaster (Michael Maloney) questions Barbara about her *friendships* (*Notes on a Scandal*)

The headmaster, Pabblem (Michael Maloney), suspects Barbara was aware of Sheba's affair with Steven and accuses her of collaborating with

her by failing to inform the authorities. When Barbara denies his accusations, Pabblem suggests that her relationship with Sheba is inappropriate. Barbara retorts, 'I think you'll find that a close friendship between consenting adults is perfectly legal.' To make his point about Barbara's inappropriate concept of friendship, the headmaster inquires about Jennifer Dodd – was she 'another of your close "friends"? […] Jennifer threatened you with a restraining order! […] You call that a friendship?' – and the restraining order he holds up proves her 'guilty.' In this scene there appears to be a shift from the initial accusation of withholding information to an investigation focused on Barbara's relationships. With this inquiry into the 'truth' of Barbara's interest in Sheba, she no longer is 'the confidante of a criminal'; suddenly Barbara is accused of being sexually deviant. It is in the context of this negatively constructed lesbian identity that Barbara's denial can be understood.

This confrontation with the headmaster is relevant in terms of Barbara's (sense of) identity and later in this chapter I will return to this scene in order to analyse the consequences these accusations have, namely the destabilisation of her sense of self. In addition, the audience suddenly realises that they have been duped by Barbara's account of her friend Jennifer.

These scenes illustrate the tensions created around the performance of 'closeted-ness.' According to Sedgwick,

> "Closeted-ness" itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence – not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularly by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds

and differentially constitutes it. The speech acts that coming out, in turn, can comprise are as strangely specific.

(1991, p3)

Barbara's continuous refusal constitutes a speech act in itself. Through these moments in which the suspicion around her non-normative sexuality is expressed by other characters, and met with Barbara's unflinching denial, her 'closeted-ness' is upheld.

Barbara refuses the subject position formulated in this context. Charged with the stigma of difference – as illustrated by Pabblem's discourse, reminiscent of the medicalisation of lesbian sexuality – Barbara's reaction is one of denial, refusal and silence. Thus, although desire is articulated through Barbara's behaviour towards Sheba, identification *as* lesbian is refused. As mentioned before, the advantages of assuming a specific sexual identity are context dependent, the consequences are ambivalent (O' Connell, 1999, p74). And the conflation of a sexual identity with the additional identity marker of *age* accrues a greater constraint in adopting a lesbian identity. As discussed in a previous chapter, and as will be made clear later in this one, Kristeva's notion of abjection allows us to understand how lesbian identity/desire is socially constructed as abject within the heteronormative context, and has to be expelled.

Finally, in a scene between Barbara and Sheba near the end of the film, a similar connection between (the suspicion of) lesbian desire and pathological obsession/devotion is established. When Sheba finds Barbara's diary, she realises the extent of Barbara's devotion to her. A violent confrontation follows, in which, Barbara's (repressed) desire is

constructed as 'shameful' and 'inappropriate' – as Sheba spits out the mocking words:

> SHEBA: You think I wanted to be here with you?
> BARBARA: You need me, I'm your friend!
> SHEBA: You put me in prison, I could get TWO years!
> BARBARA: They'll fly by! I'll visit you every week! We've so much life to live together!
> SHEBA: You think this is a love affair? A relationship? What, sticky gold stars, and – and a strand of my hair? A sticker from Pizza Express? It's a flat in the Archway Road and you think you're Virginia frigging Woolf! And where did you get my hair? Did you pluck it from the bath with some special fucking tweezers?

Figure 14 – Verbal and physical violence: Sheba confronts Barbara (*Notes on a Scandal*)

In this speech, several themes are brought together. The aforementioned suspicion about Barbara's feelings for Sheba has been confirmed by the words in Barbara's diary. In the dialogue above, Sheba reacts to the fact that Barbara had in her possession a lock of her hair. Weiss argues that 'people and not just body parts are designated as the abject other' (1999, p99). In this formulation, the individual performing this action, picking up a hair (abject element), becomes the abject. Similarly, Barbara's desire (to

share her life with Sheba, 'the one [she has] been waiting for') is established as abject through Sheba's discursive formulation (cited above) of disgust/ incredulity towards the possibility of Barbara desiring Sheba. It is the ageing body that construes a lesbian possibility as ludicrous. Perceived as the asexual old spinster, Barbara's secret obsession has to be cast off as a laughing matter.

Following this violent, verbal and physical confrontation (figure 14), Barbara reluctantly reveals the truth about her feelings. As Sheba concedes, 'I would have been your friend. I liked you' – Barbara finally confesses, 'I need more than a friend'. At this point in the narrative, this confession is anti-climatic – we, the audience, already *knew* that Barbara needed more than a friend.

Touching the Monstrous 'Other'

From an identity politics position, I argued that *Notes on a Scandal* can be seen as presenting familiar cultural motifs frequently reiterated through cinematic stereotypes – the predatory lesbian; the psychotic spinster. The scenes I mentioned in the context of Barbara's articulation of 'closeted-ness' simultaneously illustrate one aspect of the process by which Barbara is continuously presented as 'other' to the characters she interacts with. In this section, I am going to focus on another strategy that construes Barbara as the 'other'. More specifically, I will address the intersection of the older woman as 'other' with the lesbian as 'other' of a youthful, heterosexual norm.

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At this point, it is important to recall Kristeva's notion of abjection. In a previous chapter I explored this concept in terms of a cultural analysis of otherness. I argued that both the ageing body and lesbian desire are constructed as abject within a heteronormative, youth-centred cultural context. Kristeva states that abjection can be understood as 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite' (1982, p4). The normative and normalised body disturbed by the abject is in this context an idealised youthful heterosexual body.

As noted by Douglas, the process of abjection around polluting elements reveals itself as ideologically motivated: 'certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion' (1966, p3). In *Notes on a Scandal*, there are moments in which the danger of contagion (Shildrick, 2002) is alluded to by what I identified as indicators of abject domains.

Abject Age

The link between ageing and abjection has been established by several authors, as I explored in the survey of literature in a previous chapter. Constructing older women as abject positions them as the ageing 'other' within a youth-centred society (Gilleard and Higgs, 2010; Kaplan, 1999; Sandberg, 2008; Ussher, 2006). Kristeva refers to the excremental type of danger of pollution (1982, p71), symbolically linked to the ageing body (biological decline into decay). The (body of the) older woman constitutes, thus a threat. As Sandberg argues, the 'old, sagging, leaky, female body

could in many instances be regarded as the very quintessence of the abject'
(2008, p128). Barbara's ageing body is displayed partially naked in an
unusually revealing shot (see figure 15), accompanied by Barbara's
confession of loneliness, expressed in terms that acknowledge the
difference between Sheba and herself:

> BARBARA: People like Sheba think they know what it is to be lonely. But
> of the drip, drip of the long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude, they know
> nothing. What it's like to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the
> launderette. Or to be so chronically untouched that the accidental brush
> of a bus conductor's hand sends a jolt of longing straight to your groin. Of
> this, Sheba and her like have no clue.

Sheba 'and her like' are the affluent, attractive, young women who
constitute the norm/alised category against which Barbara emerges as the
'other'.

Figure 15 – The ageing body as abject 'other' in *Notes on a Scandal*

In *Notes on a Scandal*, Barbara is positioned as the abject 'other' and, as
I will illustrate, she is textually constructed as a threat to Sheba's sexual and

age identity. The transgressive potential of the abject 'other' lies in its ability to unsettle the norm, the normal self, as Shildrick proposes (2002).

The choice of (psychological) thriller elements – or more specifically of the 1960s horror-of-personality film (Derry, 2009) – the threatening musical scores by Philip Glass (that sound as a warning that no one can hear), the fast editing that contributes to the pace of the film – all these elements enhance Barbara's monstrousness; she is 'Hannibal Lecter in drip-dry knitwear' as one reviewer notes (Richards, 2006). The film constructs Barbara as the villain – the threatening 'other' of heteronormativity. Considering this construction, what are the possibilities of spectator identification? How do different audiences identify with *the 'other'*? The need to classify, to make Barbara 'confess' can be interpreted in terms of the necessity to establish a boundary between 'I' and 'they' – between normality and Barbara's abject monstrosity. This establishes the trajectory from the compulsion to confess one's sex to the identification with the monstrous. As I will conclude, Sheba's revelation of the monstrous – with her own confession of illegitimate/unlawful sex and the existence within the realm of the abject – is actually confirmation that the monstrous is always already there.

The lesbian, or lesbian desire, can disturb heterosexual identity, both in terms of the individual and in terms of the established heteronormative order in culture and, within a heteronormative cultural context, the lesbian become abject. On a collective level, the lesbian has to be expelled in order for the heterosexual order to be maintained. On an individual level, lesbian desire stands for that which has to be repressed or excluded in order to

maintain the pure self, the normative, heterosexual sense of self. Barbara's effort in maintaining a non-lesbian identity is represented in her ultimate repudiation of the 'lesbian' as abject within. This can be seen in a scene I will analyse later in this chapter (see pp207-210).

Butler's heterosexual imperative refers to a process by which abject subjects are created, excluded by the heterosexual matrix by their sex and gender configuration which does not correspond to the norm/ative configuration:

> This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet "subjects," but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject [...]
>
> (1993, p3)

The older lesbian combines, hereby, three types of abjection[87] – femininity (always already 'other'), lesbianism (outside heteronormativity) and old age (non-canonical body) – excluded from a matrix that is not only heterosexual, but youth-centred.

Moments of Abjection

In this section, I identify key moments in which abject domains are associated with Barbara, establishing her ageing body and her lesbian desire as abject/ 'other'. Kristeva's concept of abjection as well as Douglas's idea of the danger of pollution are at the centre of this analysis. Combining these with Shildrick's work on the vulnerability of the normative self, I will

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[87] Adding to the list of triple jeopardy (Poor, 1982), triple invisibility (Kehoe, 1986) and triple shame (Schoonmaker, 1993) as mentioned in a previous chapter.

argue that Sheba's encounter with the monstrous in Barbara (and within herself) is valuable in breaking down normative imperatives that establish the marginalisation of culture's abject others. Through textual analysis of these key moments, it becomes evident how Barbara is constructed as the abject 'other' in opposition to the normative youthful, heterosexual ideal.

One first moment in which it is possible to read Barbara in connection to abject elements revolves around food. This is one of the many references to abject domains to be found throughout *Notes on a Scandal*. The abject domain of food is described by Kristeva through the image of 'that skin on the surface of milk' (1982, p2), since food loathing is 'perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection' (1982, p2).

As she approaches Sheba's front door, Barbara states (in voice-over): 'Lasagne tends to disagree with my bowels' (even before the food is on the table). This statement is more than an indication of Barbara's generalised social inadequacy; it has symbolic significance. Barbara's statement combines two types of abject domains: that of food and, by extension, that of the digestive system, the type of pollution Kristeva classifies as 'excremental' (1982, p71). The moment in which Barbara enters Sheba's family life is symbolically associated with a reference to bowel movements, placing this character in the domain of the abject, and therefore as the outsider and a threat to the family. The threat that Barbara represents is the threat of the abject to the established order of an age-appropriate, heterosexual family unit. Barbara's desire is out of order, too intense for a socially approved friendship with another woman. It does not respect 'borders, positions, rules' (Kristeva, 1982, p4).

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Over lunch, Barbara expresses her disgust (in voice-over) in thinking about Richard, Sheba's husband, who she estimates is 'nearly as old as [she]', and Sheba together: 'A rogue image swam through me: hubby's pruney old mouth pursed at Sheba's breast'. Two things happen in this statement. Barbara replicates a type of ageist discourse and, thus, reinforces the same ageist cultural assumptions that position her outside the cultural norm. Additionally, the specificity of the point of contact, Sheba's breast, symbolises the youthful, fertile female body. The breast is significant as one of the orifices through which bodily fluid (milk)[88] traverses the boundary of the body's clean surface (Douglas, 1966; Shildrick, 2005). The desire for the younger body in this film revolves around the symbol of the breast – the youthful, fertile breast – and the leaky female body (Creed, 1993; Shildrick, 1997; 2002).

In the scene I analyse next, Barbara's intense feelings are portrayed through a stalker-like gesture. The character's (abject) desire manifests itself through contact with another abject domain.

In school assembly, Sheba is sitting in front of Barbara, leisurely playing with a streak of hair; one of her blonde hairs falls from Sheba's head onto Barbara's lap. As Douglas mentioned, body pairings 'skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat' (1966, p121) constitute sites of abjection, since they are situated at the border of the body. Connected to the body only by its root, the hair is already at our body's boundary between the outside and the inside. Hair is already 'dead'; but once detached from the body it ceases to

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[88] Kristeva used the analogy of the revulsion provoked by 'that skin on the surface of milk' (1982, p2) to illustrate the concept of abjection. Moreover, milk (without skin) can be considered abject in itself, having 'traversed the boundary of the body' as Douglas stated, just as 'spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears' (Douglas, 1966, p121).

be an accessory to feminine beauty, and becomes disgust-provoking refuse.

As Barbara picks up Sheba's long blonde hair and gently runs it between her fingers, this illustration of her fetish is complemented with words (voice-over) confirming a growing obsession: 'In a different, better age, we would be ladies of leisure [...] We would be companions'. As Barbara expresses her desire for companionship (and I will return to this particular voice-over in the context of romantic friendship), the camera focuses on a 'disgust provoking' gesture – picking up someone's hair. In Barbara's hands, this polluting object – Sheba's hair – comes to signify a forbidden desire. Barbara is constructed as transgressive in the context of this film's ideological framework, abject both in terms of same-sex desire and desiring a younger woman. As an object (bodily paring) – passing from Sheba's head to Barbara's hand and later to Barbara's diary, where it is found by Sheba – it is a token of Barbara's desire and Sheba's condemnation of it.

The symbol of the milk (foam) signals the object of Barbara's (abject) desire. It marks one of the first moments when Barbara's desire for Sheba becomes apparent and is reiterated at the end of the film. In the first instance, it is Sheba who, drinking a cappuccino (or another foamy drink) with Barbara and a colleague, is left with a speck of foam on her lip. Barbara smiles, points and Sheba gratefully wipes it off. Now, the foam of a cappuccino is not exactly Kristeva's abject provoking 'skin on the surface of milk' (1982, p2), but the mark of 'milk' on Sheba's upper lip provides the opportunity for a moment of closeness, which in a different context would be a sign of intimacy (recreating a classic scene in romantic narratives).

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This foam on the surface of a cappuccino becomes significant through reiteration. When, in the last scene of the film, Barbara approaches the young woman who is sipping her coffee on a park bench, two elements combine.

Figure 16 – History repeating: Barbara with Sheba (left) and with her 'next victim', Annabelle (*Notes on a Scandal*)

On that same bench, in an earlier scene, Barbara admitted 'I've such dread of ending my days alone,' while Sheba nodded empathically, ignoring the subtext (figure 16, left). Now Barbara sits down next to Annabelle (figure 16, right) who, as she finishes her coffee, has a speck of milk foam on her lip. As Barbara repeats the friendly gesture the viewers knows that Annabelle will be the next object of Barbara's desire. She bears the 'mark' of her next 'victim'.

In this context, the foam does not provoke disgust; rather it stands as a reminder of the abject nature of Barbara's desire (transgressing the rules that establish age-appropriate and opposite-sex coupling rules). The foam on the upper lip similarly provides the opportunity for Barbara's gaze to be directed at those youthful lips. Although Barbara's gesture can be seen as an indication of feminine care and cleanliness, dutifully pointing out a bit of

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foam, in both instances these moments provide the opportunity for Barbara to draw physically nearer under the 'guise' of the caring old spinster.

These are indicators of Barbara's construction as the abject 'other', the domains of abjection indicating her abject desire. In what follows, I look at another indicator of the abject; an illustration of the act of expelling one's abject as Barbara is confronted with this abject definition of herself by others.

Expelling the Lesbian Within

Barbara's sense of identity is centred on the concept of the spinster as well as that of romantic friendship (which, as we will see later in this chapter, allows same-sex intimacy without the residual notion of pathology still linked to the term *lesbian*). Her sense of identity is maintained through the negotiation of 'lesbian' elements which Barbara refrains from integrating into her*self*. This process corresponds to 'the expelling' of the abject as defined by Kristeva. Similarly, Butler describes this act of expelling as 'the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary' (1993, p114) – the boundary being the one that divides the heterosexual from the homosexual subject. The constitution of a proper self, of a 'coherent' identity (Butler, 1993, p115) implies the repudiation of unwanted selves and identity elements. Whether Barbara is hiding or repressing her homoerotic desire what matters is that it cannot be part of *her* identity. There is an obvious rejection of any insinuation of non-heteronormativity, as seen earlier in this chapter. In this scene it becomes clear that Barbara realises that her notion of friendship moves beyond the

socially accepted forms of friendship between women. According to the heteronormative framework in which Barbara's identity has been constituted, this desire is positioned as abject.

At this point I return to the confrontation between the headmaster and Barbara, as I described earlier. I analysed their confrontation in terms of the act of confession (or rather a refusal to confess). Now, I focus on the consequences of this confrontation which consists of a clash of discourses. Discourse here can be understood in terms of Foucault's conceptualisation:

> We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation [...] it is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined. Discourse in this sense is not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history; [...] it is, from beginning to end, historical [...].
>
> (1969, 2003, p131)

As we will see, Barbara's discourse around friendship can be seen as historical, or rather, as I argue later, anachronistic or ahistorically determined.

Through their altercation, Barbara's conception of friendship, in general, and her friendship with Jennifer and Sheba, in particular, is challenged by Pabblem's accusations. His discourse constructs Barbara as obsessive, her friendship as deviant. By mentioning a restraining order, he forces Barbara to recognise that her attention to Jennifer was unwanted, her friendship was unrequited. Being confronted with these facts violently destabilises Barbara's (sense of) identity, as mentioned earlier in the context of the incitement to confess.

A stigmatised sexuality (repressed lesbian desire, unrequited same-sex love, attraction to a younger woman) overlaps with the stigma of being 'the

confidante of a criminal' both in the headmaster's accusatory discourse and in the scene that follows. No confession is extracted from Barbara, since admitting to the latter would confirm the former, and debase Barbara's concept of friendship and her non-lesbian identity. Through this confrontation she is, nonetheless, confronted with her own abject (desire). As Creed argues, '[d]esire transforms the body; abject desire makes the body abject' (1995, p97). What I am interested in here is the scene that follows their discussion. Barbara is forced to accept early retirement – an alternative Pabblem proposes to spare her the embarrassment of being forced to resign.

Barbara leaves the headmaster's office in distress. A subjective shot illustrates her 'crisis' of identity – the camera assumes Barbara's look as she walks through the teachers' room, encountering the disapproving stare of other staff members. A moment before, Barbara had proudly announced – 'The majority of the staff regard me as a moral guardian' – now she has to confront a version of her/self that differs from her own perception. The disapproving looks she encounters confirm her abject status.

Figure 17 – The writing on the wall confirms the silenced words
('Babs Covett = nasty old lezza')

Barbara escapes into the school's toilet – where she expels her own abject, '[n]ot me. Not that' (1982, p2). She has to 'throw up, throw out, eject the abject' (Creed, 1993, p10), her retching body reacting to the accusations by expelling the abject lesbian element. This scene is fundamental since the unspoken accusations – of same-sex obsession, of an undisclosed lesbian identity – are written on the wall: '*Babs Covett = nasty old lezza*' (see figure 17) [89] – a pejorative version of the identity that Barbara rejects and expels from her body/self. Barbara's definition as a friend, a 'spinster' is thus unsettled by the abject (lesbian, inappropriate) emerging in the accusatory discourse. As Shildrick concurs, 'the security of human being is unsettled constantly by what Kristeva calls the abject' (2002, p55). By expelling the abject, Barbara tries to regain some sense of her 'self's clean and proper body' (Shildrick, 2002, p55). The detail of the mise-en-scène confirms my argument about the 'closeted-ness' of *Notes on a Scandal* within the official

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[89] Someone else has scrawled: 'I wanna lick her mangy twat.'

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discourse, while the 'l-word' becomes an open secret. From a directorial point of view this small detail implies the insistence on an intended reading in terms of Barbara as a (repressed) lesbian, despite the ambiguity within the official discourse. The toilet, itself a 'breach zone' a liminal space (Munt, 2001, p103), becomes the space where the word lesbian (lezza) silenced throughout the film, becomes discernible.[90]

Her *self* and her proper identity are only partially restored once she receives a call from Sheba (who is unaware of Barbara's role in the revelation of her secret). By being contacted by Sheba, she returns to her subject position of 'friend': 'Nurse, beloved friend and wise counsel' (Barbara's voice-over).

The Monstrous Encounter

Just as Barbara's sense of self is a construction – along the lines of the concepts of spinster and romantic friend – the normative, normal self is itself a construction. Shildrick explored this notion in terms of the vulnerability of the 'clean and proper self' to the encounter with the monstrous 'other'. As argued through my analysis so far the monstrous 'other' (both the ageing 'other' and the lesbian 'other') is revealed through Barbara's encounter with Sheba (the youthful, feminine, heterosexual norm). This encounter also reveals that the normative identity can be unsettled, as the monstrous is always already there.

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[90] Although only to the more attentive viewer, or *imdb* forum user, see
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0465551/trivia?tr0679307. See also the published screenplay (Marber, 2006, p96).

Shildrick defined our inherent vulnerability to the monstrous encounter in her exploration of the monster as a category of embodiment that has 'the potential to confound normative identity' (2002, p5). According to the author, we are all vulnerable to the monstrous 'other', and through contact with the 'other', our own sense of 'normalcy' is contaminated with otherness. Shildrick suggests that the encounter with the 'other' disrupts our own sense of being, we are made to recognise that the monster is both 'other' and part of our self:

> The encounter with the others who defined by our own boundaries of normality must inevitably disturb for they are irreducibly strange and disconcertingly familiar, both opaque and reflective. They enable us to recognise ourselves; they are our own abject.
>
> (2002, 69)

The encounter between Barbara and Sheba can be seen as the encounter with the *'other'*. This contagion, this recognition is in no way detrimental, since it serves the purpose of disputing the 'givenness of any body' (Shildrick, 2002, p10), it facilitates 'the realisation that a standard is not normal but normative' (2002, p50); and that the normal body is materialised through 'a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard' (2002, p55).

In this context, the encounter with the *monstrous 'other'* takes place between the two characters, as well as between the textually constructed normative viewer and the monstrous on screen.

Always Already Monstrous

At this point I have to return to a previously mentioned scene: when Barbara is invited to a family lunch at Sheba's home. I referred to the link between the moment Barbara enters Sheba's family life and the domains of the abject. Now, I wish to argue that, while Barbara is presented as the monstrous 'other', 'invading' the normative family unit, this encounter can be read as an illustration of Shildrick's argument about the 'complicity of the normal and abnormal, the pure and the impure, and above all the self and the other […]' (2002, p46). In other words, normative identity can be seen as a fabrication, an illusion maintained by its opposition to the 'other'.

Barbara is surprised by Sheba's family: her older husband, Richard (Bill Nighy), Polly, their teenage daughter and Ben, their 12-year-old son with Down's syndrome. Placed in a family context, Barbara's idealised image of Sheba is disturbed:

> BARBARA (voice-over): I had expected a suave young lawyer, and two perfect poppets. Not so. She's married some crumbling patriarch – he's nearly as old as me! And then there's the daughter – a pocket princess. And finally, a somewhat tiresome court jester.

Instead of the 'perfect' family Barbara imagined, she encounters an older husband and a disabled son. As the idealised Sheba deteriorates into the image of the mother of a teenage daughter and a disabled son, the wife of a 'crumbling patriarch' – the boundary between the inaccessible, unattainable ideal(ised) woman and the old spinster recedes. Sheba had been idealised as pure and flawless, described by Barbara in the following terms '[her] voice is pure, as if her mouth were empty and clean. As if she never had a filling. The complexion of a white peach. One can almost see her veins'.

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Now, just as her family is revealed as non-perfect, Sheba becomes more monstrous. The boundary between *I* and *you*, between *us* and *them* collapses.

This illustrates that the normative identity/self is a construction, an illusion requiring effort to maintain. Shildrick argues that

> [the] ordinary body is not given, but is always an achievement. It is a body that requires constant maintenance and/or modification to hold off the ever-present threat of disruption [...]. In short, the normal body is materialised through a set of reiterative practices that speak to the instability of the singular standard.
>
> (2002, p55)

In what follows I have chosen two instances in which Barbara constitutes this element of the 'ever present threat of disruption' (Shildrick, 2002, p55) to the normative identity (youthful / heterosexual). In other words, Barbara presents a threat to Sheba's sense of youthfulness (her youthful self) and her heterosexual self.

Shildrick argues that the monster dissolves the boundary between the same and the different:

> It is not that the monster represents the threat *of* difference, but that it threatens to interrupt difference – at least in its binary form – such that the comfortable otherness that secures the selfsame is lost.
>
> (2002, p45)

The otherness that secures a sense of normality can, in this context, be seen as the ageing woman. The norm/al is firstly, the youthful self – Sheba – but her similitude to Barbara's monstrousness becomes evident in her own transgressive desire for someone younger (approximately her own son's age).

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In addition to attraction to the younger body, Sheba's desire for Steven can be seen as an attempt to escape her present situation – her age, her role as wife and mother (caring for a moody teenager and a disabled son), with all the responsibilities that this involves. Sheba longs for the carelessness of youth and Steven allows this momentary return to a lost youth; 'I hadn't been pursued like that for years' she confesses to Barbara.

This momentary recovering of her youth is interrupted when Steven picks up her son's wizard hat – she is instantly brought back to her role as a mother and wife. Sheba knows her youth is fading and that, according to dominant cultural principles, she is moving towards the margin of the heteronormative notion of attractiveness:

> One of the consequences of the physical changes that begin in midlife […] is a movement towards the margins of heterosexual attractiveness, as women are no longer positioned inside the boundaries of acceptability for what it is to be 'woman'.
>
> (Ussher, 2006, p148)

To a certain degree, there is a likeness between her and Barbara. Both of them are disillusioned with life, with the 'gap' – 'the distance between life as you dream it and life as it is' as Sheba admits.

In one of the key scenes, in which Barbara admonishes Sheba for continuing to see Steven, the illusion of a youthful self is unsettled once Barbara verbalises the truth that Sheba does not want to hear. Defining Sheba's affair as resulting from the 'neurotic compulsions of a middle-class lady with marital problems', Barbara adds, 'Once he's had his fill he'll discard you like an *old* rag [...] YOU ARE *NOT YOUNG*!'[91]. In this

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[91] My italics.

confrontation, Barbara unsettles Sheba's normative identity as an attractive young woman.

Sheba represents the norm, as opposed to Barbara, the 'other' – but their encounter, as suggested by Shildrick, interrupts difference, their differences – Sheba's monstrousness is revealed, and her fear is uncovered, as Barbara reminds her that she is 'not young'. This is an indication of the aforementioned binary construction of age: 'it pivots on the blunt binary of young and old, as if there were only two states of age' (Woodward, 1999, p.xvii). The youthful body is under threat of being perceived as 'old.' The 'denial and repression of the very subject of aging and old age' is a general symptom of the anxiety and fear surrounding the process of ageing as Woodward notes (1999, p4). Sheba holds on to her youth/ful self in order to avoid the only other state of 'being old'.

Next, I describe another fundamental encounter between Barbara and Sheba, a moment when Barbara's touch unsettles Sheba's sense of identity. As Shildrick argues, 'it is through touch that we may come face to face with our other selves' (2002, p107). Sheba's ideal/ised normative self is compromised by the touch of the 'other.' Literally, Barbara's fingertips on Sheba's arms destabilises her sense of identity: '[t]he responses of disavowal of and identification with the monstrous arise equally because we are already without boundaries, already vulnerable' (Shildrick, 2002, p6).

Barbara's cat has just died, she sits at Sheba's kitchen table, crying, hoping for her friend's support. But Sheba is visibly distracted, impatiently playing with her mobile phone, and obviously dressed for a 'date' with Steven. Barbara is persistent, and although getting up to leave, she hovers

at the door. She looks at Sheba: 'I like that top. It suits you.' This innocent compliment of an item of clothing, usual among friends, gains a different meaning as the scene unfolds, and becomes more a clumsy pick-up line. Barbara carries on:

BARBARA: When I was at school, if one of us had had some bad news or was a bit down, we used to stroke each other. You know, someone would do one arm and someone else the other. It was a wonderful sensation. Did you do that at your school?
SHEBA: No.
BARBARA: It's incredibly relaxing – for the giver and the receiver.

Coinciding with this dialogue, the camera assumes Barbara's perspective and follows her look to a close-up shot of Sheba's cleavage in the aforementioned top. She asks Sheba to close her eyes, 'It doesn't work if you don't', and begins to stroke Sheba's arms, slowly and sensuously. Her fingertips run along Sheba's open palm, then along her bare forearm and back, up and down. We can see how Sheba's body reacts – is she embarrassed by the tickling or enjoying the sensation? Barbara's pleasure is evident as a joyful smile appears on her face; she has accomplished her 'conquest'.

At this point, and before resuming my argument about Sheba's vulnerability to this touch, I would like to discuss the significance of this scene in terms of an erotic encounter. From Barbara's perspective, this kind of intimacy is exceptional, out of the ordinary. Let us not forget that this is a character who – plans 'an entire weekend around a visit to the launderette' and who confesses (in voice-over) 'to be so chronically untouched that the accidental brush of a bus conductor's hand sends a jolt of longing straight to [her] groin'. The sexual undertone of the phrase 'the giver and the receiver'

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(active/passive) becomes evident. In this context, touching the soft skin of the object of her desire should be seen as a significant moment for this character. If it can be assumed that the bus conductor's hand (above) is a male hand, this does obviously suggest that touch is more important than the gender (of the person whose touch is felt). I would suggest that Barbara is so lonely and 'chronically untouched' that sexual preference and the gender of her object of desire become secondary. This seems to indicate that Barbara can be read as queer rather than lesbian, a reading I pursue later in this chapter. The fact that her three main objects of desire – Jennifer, Sheba and Annabelle – are women supports the lesbian reading established here.

Secondly, the imagery of the hand, of fingers, will not go unnoticed from a lesbian viewer's perspective. Several authors have noted the importance of the 'lesbian hand' (Henderson, 1999; Merck, 2000; Wednesday, 2008). In her analysis of *Go Fish*, Henderson points to the importance of fingernail clipping for lesbian audiences: 'We do, after all, wear some of our sexual equipment naked, in public, at the end of our sleeves' (1999, p43). While Merck (2000) refers to the importance of the 'hand job' in the context of *Bound* (Wachowski, 1996). Combining the character's untouched existence with the meaningfulness of this encounter, the act of Barbara's fingertips touching Sheba's arms emerges as metonymic sex act (figure 18).

Figure 18 – Touching the 'other': Barbara's ageing hands in contrast
to Sheba's youthful smooth skin (*Notes on a Scandal*)

Barbara's stalker-like behaviour and her obsession with Sheba can trigger a mixed response in viewers. Her loneliness is extreme, as in her own words she is 'chronically untouched.' She invites sympathy. As Barbara's same-sex desire is revealed, a lesbian or bisexual identified viewer can, nonetheless, assume a more sympathetic stance and question the reason why Sheba and Barbara cannot 'be together'? As Barbara touches Sheba, her audacity has to be admired. Under the pretence of 'childhood play' an undeniably erotic moment is permissible.

Barbara benefits from the assumption of heterosexuality, or rather, the assumption of sexless old age. Thus, she can approach Sheba as the asexual older female friend. These cultural assumptions are challenged throughout the film, since although lonely and in desperate need of human contact, Barbara is neither harmless nor helpless and manages to blackmail Sheba into being her 'friend'. Sheba only reluctantly agrees to the arm stroking, more out of pity and certainly assured of the harmlessness of Barbara's request. However, once she realises the erotic potential of this

gesture, she asks Barbara to stop. This touch is inappropriate – according to heteronormative, age-appropriate conventions.

Having established the significance of this particular encounter for Barbara, it has to be said that for Sheba this touch signifies a brief disturbance of her definition as a heterosexual woman. According to Shildrick, the encounter with the 'other' who defines our 'boundaries of normality' (2002, p69) can have a disturbing effect, because the others 'enable us to recognise ourselves; they are our own abject' (2002, p69). The pleasure Sheba experiences is the abject lesbian desire, contagiously moving from Barbara, the monstrous 'other', to Sheba, who recognises her own abject, and rejects it: 'I really think that's enough, Barbara.' Her tone characterises this encounter as inappropriate behaviour between friends, implicit is her fear of touch and contamination, the touch of Barbara's monstrous otherness:

> The implication is that self-identity and self-image are fundamentally unstable, they must be protected from any/body that is either insecurely bounded in itself, or that threatens to fracture or expose the corporeal and ontological vulnerability of the singular subject.
> (Shildrick, 2002, p106)

Queering *Notes on a Scandal*

As seen in the previous section, the ageing 'other' and the lesbian 'other' are constructed as such through processes of abjection. Barbara is doubly *othered* through the converging elements of abjection established around her age and her 'deviant' desire. I have argued that from an identity politics position, Barbara can be seen as a 'negative' image, combining several stereotypes of age and lesbian sexuality. The textually constructed position

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of the 'other' is one that does not *invite* identification from the spectator in a straightforward way.

Any type of engagement with a character such as Barbara would require what Wilton denominates 'engagement strategies' (1994c, p149). The question is, are these strategies of appropriation and/or of engagement a viable alternative to compensate for absent pleasures in recognising oneself in a representation? Is this a possibility for doubly or triply marginalised viewers, for instance an ageing female viewer or an older lesbian viewer?

In this section, I intend to adopt an alternative perspective, one that approaches the abject, the monstrous, more constructively; one that allows engagement with characters who present 'unattractive' traits. As outlined in Chapter Two, theories of appropriation are diverse, including feminist (Arbuthnot and Seneca, 1990; Jermyn, 1996) and black (lesbian) studies (Bobo, 2004; Nataf, 1995) approaches to appropriating mainstream narratives. A queer studies perspective on *Notes on a Scandal* can be particularly productive in terms of allowing engagement with the ageing, monstrous 'other', appropriating their transgressive potential.

The possible relationship between cinematic monsters and queer viewers has been addressed by Benshoff (2004a). In this context, I wish to consider viewer engagement with a particular monster – the older lesbian character, stereotypically 'heartless, unemotional, lonely and predatory' (Berger, 1982, p237). Beyond the readings allowed by a 'positive' images perspective rehearsed at the beginning of this chapter, I wish to explore *Notes on a Scandal*'s queer potential. Taking into consideration that engagement with Barbara's character is not textually encouraged, I am going to explore the

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possibilities of a queer appropriation of Barbara's transgressive behaviour by theorising an actively engaged viewer position.

Approaching Barbara's character from a queer theory position, an alternative argument can be articulated. Barbara's dismissal of a lesbian identity creates a distance from the negative connotations the identity markers 'lesbian' and 'old' (intersected) assume in a heteronormative, youth-oriented culture – as illustrated in this film.[92] Barbara's denial of the 'accusations' of lesbianism (as seen at the beginning of this chapter), can be read in line with a queer theory's refusal of rigid, fixed sexual identities. In addition, Barbara's transgressive (label-free) desire can be appropriated as a queer subversion of stereotypical depictions of the predatory, lonely lesbian. This reading allows active audiences to distance themselves from the 'negative' image and to engage with a subversive depiction of gender, age and sexuality.

Notes on a Scandal cannot easily be associated with what would be considered (new) queer cinema. Despite portraying a queer individual, this film fails to 'problematise stereotypical images of queer sexuality' as Street argues. Street adds that it 'pathologises the attraction of an older school teacher [...] for a younger colleague' (2009, p239). There are, nonetheless, elements in *Notes on a Scandal* that allow a queer reading as it 'does partake of concepts either drawn from or consistent with queer theory and the New Queer Cinema' (Benshoff, 2004b, p172).[93] This is not an obvious association, seeing that new queer cinema mainly portrays young, male gay

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[92] Several 'labels' are ascribed to Barbara by others: 'crone', 'dyke', 'vampire', 'bitter old virgin', 'freak'.
[93] Benshoff was referring to *The Talented Mr Ripley* (Minghella, 1999), a film he reads as a queer mainstream film.

characters.[94] To establish this reading, I base my arguments on two main concepts: firstly, queer theory's rejection of stable identities and contempt for 'positive' images; and, secondly, Halberstam's notion of 'queer temporality' (2005).

While from an identity politics approach Barbara can be considered as a variation on the familiar cultural image of the 'evil lesbian' (Becker *et al.*, 1995; Buchanan, 2007), a queer theory position enables viewers to embrace this character as transgressive. Drawing on Anneke Smelik's queer re-evaluation of 'murderous lesbian' characters (2004), I will highlight the possibilities of appropriating Barbara as a transgressive queer figure. Smelik's observation regarding the portrayal of 'murderous lesbians' rings true of *Notes on a Scandal*'s presentation of Barbara as a complex character:

> They are fascinating characters in their transgressive behaviour, carried away in the maelstrom of their passion. Admittedly, some of the women are *bordering on the insane*, but the films work to understand the complex psychic life rather than reject or despise them.
>
> (2004, p70)[95]

Smelik continues, the 'narrative point of view lies unambiguously with the girls' perspective, the spectator aligns her sympathy with them' (2004, p71). While in *Notes on a Scandal*, the viewer is given insight into Barbara's world – her sharp observations, her emotions, above all, her loneliness – viewers' alignment shifts throughout the narrative.

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[94] As Rich observes, 'all the new movies being snatched up by distributors, shown in mainstream festivals, booked into theatres, are by the boys. Surprise, the amazing new lesbian videos that are redefining the whole dyke relationship to popular culture remain hard to find' (2004, p54).
[95] My italics.

The viewer understands the reasons behind Barbara's obsessive tendencies. However, once the focalisation shifts to include Sheba's perspective (in a lengthy flashback scene), Barbara becomes a less reliable character and her remarks (in voice-over) show her perceptions (of Sheba and of their relationship) as delusional. Any allegiance (Smith, 1995b) with her requires an active effort from a sympathetic viewer or a transgressive identification with the 'queer monster' she is depicted as. Barbara's defiance and queer transgression is implicit in her act of claiming the identity of the 'spinster'.

'Standard issue for a Spinster'

'Standard issue for a spinster' says Barbara as Sheba spots her cat Portia. Barbara here is assuming the stereotype of the lonely spinster (whose only companion is her cat) in a semi-serious self-derogatory way. Defined in a patriarchal context, spinster(hood) signifies incomplete or 'failed' womanhood, 'she is something other than a woman' as Carroll states (2007; see also: Markson and Taylor, 2000). According to a heteronormative timeline, Barbara has failed – she 'failed' to secure a husband, to marry, to have children – and is now 'past' the (re)productive stage of a woman's life. As a consequence, there is only one category available for her – that of the asexually perceived 'old maid' or spinster. While rejecting a lesbian identity, as I argued throughout this chapter, it can be said that Barbara does seem to identify with this figure of the spinster on some level.

Although it is a concept generated within a patriarchal context, the figure of the spinster allows a reading based on its inherent queer element. As

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White suggests, 'crypto-lesbian type of the spinster' has always been suggestive of non-normative female sexuality (1999, p117; p125). Barbara's self-identification as a spinster can, in addition, be interpreted as an act of defiance. These subversions will be further explored in the following chapter – around the star persona of Judi Dench. At this point it is enough to argue that Barbara deviates from the gender and age-roles ascribed to her as an older woman and subverts ageist assumptions about asexual old age. She simultaneously evokes the concept of the asexual spinster and subverts it.

Another concept that facilitates articulating Barbara's idea of spinster as queer is the concept of time, crucial in this context. According to Carroll, spinsterhood implies a stable identity, 'an identity which is fixed and irrevocable in time; it is a default identity, defined by what has not happened and confirmed by the temporal certainty that it will not happen' (2007, p6). Barbara unsettles this stability, this idea of fixity of time. Against the certainty that it will *not* happen (2007, p6), Barbara's reiterated attempts to find a companion represent a definite rejection of this premise. In fact, the idea that she is 'past (it)' is constructed within an ideological framework centred on the norm of a reproductive female body. This organisation of time and consecutive life stages corresponds to Halberstam's notion of 'reproductive time', seen as a heteronormative time/space construct (2005, p10). Barbara revolts against this 'temporal certainty' – subverting the *past-ness* of spinsterhood. Indeed, the concept of time that establishes Barbara as a character is that of Halberstam's queer temporality (2005).

'In a different better age'

Longing for an alternative temporal setting is expressed in the voice-over monologue mentioned earlier: 'In a different, better age, we would be ladies of leisure [...] We would be companions'. As mentioned, this is the scene where Barbara picks up Sheba's hair. Barbara's idealised setting for (the possibility of) a relationship with Sheba can be understood as this character's own version of romantic friendship.

This 'better age' could be imagined as a past pre-industrial era, somewhere between the 17th and the 19th centuries. It can be interpreted as the golden age of romantic friendship, in a time before the medicalisation or criminalisation of homosexuality.[96] Drawing on Halberstam's queer temporality (2005), I argue that Barbara's anachronistic perception of intimacy between two women – more aligned with the notion of romantic friendship – positions her outside the heteronormative/ patriarchal time frame and, thus, within a 'queer time-line'.

Although reminiscent of the concept of romantic friendship, this idealised era is not so much of a personal or historical past; as it is better understood in terms of an alternative 'timeframe', one that is distinct from, but might run in parallel to the heteronormative sense of time. In a way, it is possible to understand Barbara's 'queerness as an outcome of [her] strange temporalities' (Halberstam, 2005, p1). This character's notion of time is determined by her loneliness, as can be concluded as she admits to planning a whole weekend 'around a visit to the launderette'. As I will show

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[96] The concept of romantic friendship has been articulated by several scholars in terms of the history of lesbian identities (Faderman, 1985; Vicinus, 2004; Wahl, 1999). For a detailed exploration of several approaches to the concept of Romantic Friendship and its problematic use in the context of lesbian studies see (Wahl, 1999).

next, this lonely existence in an alternative 'timeframe' generates a notion of friendship that is similarly 'queered.'

The fact that Barbara writes a journal, in which she records her daily musings and in which she keeps the occasional gold stars, is not in itself an indication of her anachronistic existence. It is more an indication of her indifference to the contemporary, modern world around her, a digitalised world of mobile communications and short-text-messages. It is this combination of activities with the type of vocabulary she uses, that becomes significant.

Barbara's fond memories of a girlhood spent in a homosocial environment are indicative that these kind of intimate relationships between women, free from the stigma of same-sex love, are considered the ideal. I recall here that Barbara reminisces about arm-stroking in a past – 'at school' – a setting in which this kind of intimacy between girls was interpreted as guilt free and innocent.

Reading Barbara through the lens of Halberstam's concept of queer temporality reveals Barbara's queerness both as not-lesbian-identified and non-heterosexual (and possibly non-old to the extent that her age does not bear the same significance in a non-reproductive context). Halberstam establishes the opposition between queer and heteronormative uses of time (2005). The following explanation seems particularly appropriate to address Barbara's queerness. Barbara's way of life (even if her solitude is involuntary) is indeed 'a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing' (Halberstam, 2005, p2). In addition, this queerness is detached from a sexual identity: '[i]f we try to think about

queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity' (Halberstam, 2005, p1).

In one particular monologue, Barbara recalls Jennifer's thoughts about their friendship. This illustrates the intensity of Barbara's feelings, obviously disproportionately directed at someone she describes as 'just a friend':

> BARBARA (voice-over): Jennifer said I was too intense. […] Meaning what exactly? That I am loyal in my friendships? That I will go to the end of the earth for someone I admire?

Barbara's emotions, their sheer intensity, seem to belong to another century. The semantics of romantic friendship employed by Barbara throughout the film establish the link between this character and a distant (historical, idealised) past – 'a different, better age' – in which her spinsterhood and her desired intimacy with other women would have been possible without being associated to the pejorative (and for Barbara, negative) identity/label *lesbian*.

These are the guidelines according to which Barbara can be approached from a queer perspective. A viewer's position deriving from this subversion of stereotypical depictions will be subversive of conventional roles of gender, sexuality and age. To move beyond the 'positive' images perspective, the concept of an active, engaged audience is required, in order to align herself with Barbara's subversions of the notion of asexual old age.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter I explored images that presented variations on the concept of the lesbian as ghosted. In this chapter I investigated another paradigm of lesbian representability – the figure of the monstrous older lesbian. I decided to focus on the protagonist of *Notes on a Scandal* as the most visible image of a non-heterosexual woman in contemporary cinema. Barbara Covett is also important in that she differs from characters analysed in my previous chapter by assuming centre stage in a narrative that revolves around her and her desires.

Earlier in this chapter, I started with a consideration of several film reviews that presented contrasting interpretations of Barbara's identity. Re/viewing Barbara implies the double meaning of simultaneously reviewing this film and of reviewing or revisiting the familiar figure of the monstrous lesbian in film. Based on a brief comparison between literary and film text as well as on interviews with Heller, author of the homonymous source novel, I argued that the 'adapted' Barbara differs from her literary predecessor. The main distinction is that, in the film, the (lesbian) stalker motif and several elements evoking a psychothriller genre or the 1960s 'horror-of-personality' film (Derry, 2009) are at work. These elements frame Barbara as threatening and, in combination, establish her as the monstrous, abject other.

The paradigm of the monstrous other centres on the concept of abjection (Kristeva, 1982). Drawing on Kristeva's concept of abjection and Douglas' idea of the danger of pollution (1966) I identified moments in which abject domains establish Barbara, her ageing body and her lesbian desire as

abject/ 'other'. The encounter between Sheba, the normalised self, and Barbara the monstrous 'other' was examined in terms of a challenge to the normative youthful, heterosexual ideal. Only in opposition to the normative does Barbara emerge as abject 'other'. According to this cultural construct, the old lesbian combines, hereby, three types of abjection – femininity (always already 'other'), lesbianism and old age – and is consequently excluded from a matrix that is not only heterosexual, but youth-centred.

I also approached the *Leitmotif* of the confessional act that runs through *Notes on a Scandal* through Foucault's concept of confession and establishment of the 'truth' of sex. I analyse Barbara's persistent refusal to confess (her obsessions, her sexual identity) as a subversive act through which she rejects pejorative notions associated to the identity/label old lesbian. This refusal simultaneously provides the bridge between an identity politics-based reading of the 'negative' image of the 'evil' monstrous lesbian and a consideration of Barbara as a queer character.

Although *Notes on a Scandal* could hardly be characterised as a queer film, I identified elements that assist in generating a queer reading. The first element analysed was, as mentioned, Barbara's denial of a (sexual) identity. This refusal is interpreted in light of queer theory's destabilisation of fixed categories of sexual identity. The identity of the spinster (loosely assumed by Barbara) is explored both in terms of its queer undertones and Barbara's subversion of the notion of asexuality linked to it. Finally I read Barbara's concept of friendship through Halberstam's (2005) concept of queer temporality. This character's peculiar notion of friendship can be seen in terms of the historical concept of romantic friendship (Faderman, 1985).

This chapter proposed two different readings of the character Barbara Covett which in a broader context can generate further discussions in terms of representations of ageing (and sexuality). The dilemma around 'positive' images or queer subversions is relatively new when considering the intersection between age, gender and sexuality. Besides, as I have argued throughout this chapter, the number of ageist configurations that intersect with representations of lesbian sexuality render a subversive reading more problematic. This is not to say that alternative readings are irrelevant. The queer characteristics I identified in my analysis of *Notes on a Scandal* render Barbara's monster more 'palatable.' Cohen states that 'the monster always escapes' (1996) and that is exactly the impression we are left with as Barbara approaches the young woman on the park bench in the last scene of the film. Barbara escaped and is approaching her next 'victim' and some of us, at least, cannot help but admire her determination.

Dench's role as Barbara Covett has been characterised as 'against type' (Torrance, 2007). According to my findings in this thesis, however, this role maintains the continuity of non-heterosexual female characters for Dench, including the briefly mentioned Iris Murdoch in *Iris* and Agnis in *The Shipping News* (analysed in my pervious chapter). Given the limited number of older lesbian characters in contemporary cinema, this incidence is significant. This leads logically into the following chapter in which, in addition to Judi Dench's 'queer' roles, I explore a range of other characters who can be seen as subversive of traditional gender roles and age norms. Dench's character M (in the Bond films) in particular provides the opportunity for a lesbian appropriation of an older female character that is

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not explicitly presented as heterosexual, or at least brings together qualities

that make her 'lesbianisable.'

Chapter Six

(Mis)Reading Judi Dench

Introduction

Throughout previous chapters I established how paradigms of lesbian representation in film intersect with ageist stereotypes of ageing heterosexual femininities. In Chapter Four, my focus was on the apparitionalisation of lesbian characters (a mode of representation first identified by Castle). Through the analysis of *Hold Back the Night*, *If These Walls Could Talk 2* and *The Shipping News,* I argued that current images of ageing lesbian women display the characteristics of the apparitional/ghostly lesbian (Castle, 1993) and of the disappearing older female body (Woodward, 2006). In terms of identity politics, these images of illness, loss and bereavement, can be seen as 'negative' representations of the older lesbian in film, although they function as universal, shared experiences, and establish her 'absolute ordinariness' (Walters, 2003, p221). Ultimately, the identity category 'lesbian' reinforces the narrative of decline already associated to ageing.

In Chapter Five, I revisited a variation on the familiar theme of the lesbian as the monstrous 'other' in the figure of Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) in *Notes on a Scandal*. By combining same-sex desire with old age, the older lesbian combines three types of abjection and otherness: gender, age and sexuality. In my reading of *Notes on a Scandal* I argued that its protagonist, Barbara, is consistently positioned as the (ageing, lesbian) 'other' to the normative youthful female body.

Judi Dench has had a significant presence throughout this thesis, first as Agnis in *The Shipping News*, who presented an alternative to the narrative of decline and widowhood, then as the monstrous 'other' in *Notes on a*

Scandal. In this chapter I therefore wish to further investigate the importance of Dench more thoroughly in relation to the representation of older lesbians in mainstream cinema. Central to this, and to my discussion of Dench (born 1934) and her star image, is the notion of *(mis)reading.* I use *(mis)reading* here to imply that instead of the more usual, dominant or preferred readings, I advocate reading Judi Dench against the grain of conventional interpretations of this actress' performance.

I begin with an analysis of discourses constructed around Judi Dench's star image by the British press. I will argue that the most prominent theme, the concept of 'National Treasure,' originated in, and is maintained by, a combination of ageist and sexist principles. A vast and complex repertoire of theatre, television and film roles is, consequently, reduced to a limiting and condescending conception ('little old lady') under the auspices of the national heritage discourse. Much of what has been written about Dench (mostly in the press) fits into this type of discourse. By focusing on her performances in feature film, I propose to challenge Dench's star image by highlighting an inherent *Leitmotif* of subversion, which can be seen to extend from her role as M in *GoldenEye* to her recent role as Mona Carvell in *Rage*.

Given the limited number of older lesbian characters in contemporary film, the fact that Judi Dench has appeared in several lesbian or queer roles – bisexual writer Iris Murdoch (in *Iris*), self-identified lesbian Agnis (in *The Shipping* News) and a character who, despite rejecting this identity expresses same-sex desire, Barbara (in *Notes in a Scandal*) – is significant. This chapter looks beyond her specifically lesbian/queer roles to explore the

wider implications of Dench's more recent film performances. This final analytical chapter is based on the premise that films and their characters are 'lesbianisable' by an actively engaged viewer (provided there are enough viable textual elements to support this kind of reading).

After considering Judi Dench's star image in the context of her numerous film roles, I focus on probably the most popular and visible character associated with Dench – James Bond's boss M, head of British Intelligence Service. The role of M marks the beginning of Dench's international film career and I argue that it is a significant recurring role in relation to the possibilities of *(mis)reading*. My analysis of M carries on from Dench's portrayal of other transgressive female characters. I will argue that M presents both a feminist presence within the conventionally sexist universe of the Bond franchise and, in addition, can be seen to subvert commonly held preconceptions in relation to the representation of gender, age and sexuality.

My main method for this analysis is to revisit a traditional mode of lesbian viewing where non-lesbian texts, actresses and characters (Whatling, 1997) were appropriated and rendered lesbian through various 'against the grain' viewing strategies. Here however, instead of the masculine, youthful and muscular bodies of actresses such as Linda Hamilton or Sigourney Weaver, which were appropriated in previous studies (Graham, 1994; Hankin, 1998; Jennings, 1994), I redirect this strategy to readings of a non-youthful, non-muscular, although masculine body.

I will argue that from 1995 onwards, the character M (from Dench's accession to the role) is ripe for appropriation from a lesbian viewing

position. I argue that Dench's portrayal of lesbian/bisexual/queer female characters creates an intertextual nexus of meanings which open up a series of engagement possibilities, viewing pleasures and empowering role models from mainstream cinema texts that exist beyond the ghosted or the monstrous constructions that I have discussed so far in this thesis. My strategy in this chapter aims to challenge the propensity within film and cultural studies for lesbian readings to only concentrate on representations of muscular and youthful bodies as pleasurable appropriations. I therefore offer alternative cinematic images as 'lesbianisable.' Although I conclude that such oppositional readings have a limited impact (no actual change is brought about in terms of actual representations), I suggest that by moving beyond the focus of youth, a wider range of possible identifications and pleasures becomes available within mainstream cinema.

Judi Dench's Star Image

In this section, I begin with a characterisation of Judi Dench's star image, centred on her national treasure status. When Judi Dench received the title of Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1987 this ascension to a national symbol seemed predictable. In addition to the veneration and the association to 'quality' (of her craft as an actress) that this title evokes – it rewards individuals who have made outstanding and long-term contribution in a significant capacity at a national level – the term Dame Judi is used endearingly by fans and peers. Against this setting I will argue that her public perception as 'saintly' and 'sweet' (Cochrane, 2009) contains ageist undertones. In contrast, by focusing on her cinematic roles, a more

transgressive and subversive image arises, one that is more in tune with Dench's professional inclination towards the unexpected and unpredictable in terms of her choice of roles.

According to Dyer, the star phenomenon 'consists of everything that is publicly available about stars' including 'interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life' (2004, p2). Most importantly, a star's image is also 'what people say or write about him or her' (Dyer, 2004, p3). In the case of Judi Dench what is publicly available seems to centre on one type of discourse – that of national treasurehood (which I will address later in this chapter). This discourse presents the actress as a nationalised figure. Gledhill's work on stardom provides useful insight into the issues that are involved in analysing Dench as a star (1991). According to Gledhill a star crosses disciplinary boundaries:

> a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups [...].

(1991, pxiii)

When considering Judi Dench's star image it is her theatrical background and the fact that she constitutes an 'emblem of national celebrity' that is the more prominent aspect. However, as suggested by Gledhill in the quotation above, a star's image can also be considered as a site of contest. In my analysis, this contest revolves around gendered images of ageing and the possibility to recover Dench's more transgressive roles for a lesbian reading.

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A brief look at articles in the British press shows that Judi Dench's star image revolves around two main themes, an actor's craft and national ownership. Dench's name is usually followed by various superlatives – 'Britain's most liked and respected person' (Cochrane, 2009), 'one of UK's most revered actresses' (BBC News page), 'our greatest national treasure' (Cochrane, 2009). The expression 'queen of the surveys' (Gristwood, 1997) confirms her popularity with the public in general, as illustrated by several polls over the years. For instance, to mention only a few, Dench came second as Britain's Best Loved Person in a 2002 poll (The Queen was the first) (Jones, 2007; Norman, 2006); in 2005 she was voted Britain's most popular screen legend (alongside Sean Connery);[97] the same year she topped a poll to discover Britain's national treasure (Dingwall, 2005); and, in 2009, she was 'named the nation's favourite female role model' (Turner, 2009).

Dench has a dedicated fan base and there are websites where her followers share interviews, articles and photographs of their beloved actress.[98] This type of fan activity influences a star's image, as Soukup describes: 'fans can significantly influence the meanings, uses, and even production/distribution of media texts and manipulate the complex iconography of celebrities to "visibly" participate in public discourse' (2006, p320).

An exhaustive consideration of Judi Dench's career is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The vastness of her career and the fullness of her life are, however, comprehensively documented in her biographies and

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[97] See: http://skyliving.sky.com/celebrity/Sean-Named-Screen-Legend.
[98] See for instance: www.djdchronology.com/index2.htm.

autobiographies (Dench, 2010; Dench and Miller, 2005; Miller, 1999; 2004).[99] There is, as Ian Nathan correctly observes, 'a decade-specific symmetry' to her acting career that could be (very succinctly) summarised as follows: 'During the 1960s and 1970s it was theatre [...]. For the 1980s it was television and the relative comfort zone of the sitcom. [...] In the 1990s Dench became a movie star' (Nathan, 2002).

Starting on the stage of the Old Vic (1957-1961), she performed most of Shakespeare's plays. Dench was part of several theatre companies over the years: The Royal Shakespeare Company, The Nottingham Playhouse, The Oxford Playhouse, The National Theatre Company. The list of awards is similarly extensive, including seven Laurence Olivier Awards for best actress. In 2008, Dench 'scooped the Bronte Award, which recognises outstanding achievement in the Arts' (Anonymous, 2008a) in an initiative launched by the British Library in association with *The Sunday Telegraph*.

In terms of television, Judi Dench is most strongly associated with costume/period pieces, most recently, *Cranford* (2007, 2009) and sit-coms. The general public will know her best from her television appearances in the ITV television series *A Fine Romance* (1980-1983), in which she starred alongside her husband Michael Williams, or from the long-running situation comedy *As Time Goes By* (1992-2005). These roles made a strong impression on her star image as I will argue in this chapter.

The list of awards Dench received for her television performances is equally vast, including BAFTAS, Screen Actors Guild Awards, Golden

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[99] For a brief biography, as well as an overview of the wide-ranging roles in theatre, television (plays and series) and film see the Screen Online website:
http://www.screenonline.org.uk/people/id/459437/ or The Museum of Broadcast Communications
http://www.museum.tv/eotvsection.php?entrycode=denchjudi.

Globes and one Academy Award. Among the vast list of awards, there are over eight BAFTA wins across the television and film categories (including an Academy Fellowship) and 12 BAFTA nominations; two Golden Globe awards and over five nominations; one Academy Award for Best Actress in a Supporting Role for *Shakespeare in Love* (Madden,1998) and five nominations; only to mention a few.[100]

By the 1980s Dench 'had scaled the highest pinnacles in the theatre' (Miller, 1999, p727) but her 'handful of appearances in the cinema was limited to often quite small supporting roles, in art-house movies that were never contenders for huge box office success' (Miller, 1999, p727). The 'movie star' was long in the making, as Dench started her film career at the age of 61. According to one anecdote, repeated in biographies and interviews alike, she stayed away from film for so long because on her first screen test, as a young actress, she was told 'Miss Dench, I have to tell you that you have every single thing wrong with your face' (Dench, 2010, p157). This implies that Dench has an unconventionally attractive face that kept her away from cinema screens for years. Being unconventional in terms of a heterosexually established set of beauty ideals further supports the alternative reading I propose in the context of my analysis.

It is the part of spy chief M in the 1995 *GoldenEye* that marks the start of her film career. This role, combined with the launch of *Mrs Brown* (Madden, 1997) in the United States 'gave her for the first time an international profile, and a subsequent presence at by far the biggest event in the world of show-business – the Academy Awards ceremony' (Miller, 1999, p281).

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[100] For further information on awards see Miller (1999) or http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001132/awards.

This double profile as a theatre star and a film star brings ambivalence to Dench's star image, as meaning changes depending on the audience's perspective. While publicising *Mrs Brown* in the United States, Dench was startled whenever someone asked what she had done previously in her career, before playing M in *GoldenEye*, 'the whole of 40 years' work sliding straight down the plughole' as she puts it (Gristwood, 1997).

This split perception of Judi Dench as the Grand Dame of Theatre (from a British perspective) and the 'movie star' (from an international one) is certainly one of the elements contributing to the multitude of meanings her star image can take. For a British audience she is a national symbol, while from a more international perspective (although still evoking Englishness) there is less immediate knowledge about her private life and less emotional attachment (this involvement is addressed below).

A star can embody contradictory elements. And it is this polysemic quality I wish to explore, arguing that there are elements to Dench's star image that can be appropriated by different audiences. According to Dyer, audiences 'cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them' (Dyer, 2004, p4). Judi Dench's polysemic image is alluded to by one journalist who asks:

> Is she as haughty and domineering as Queen Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love*, as vulnerable and grief-stricken as Queen Victoria in *Mrs Brown*, as capricious as Laura Henderson in *Mrs Henderson Presents*, or the sad, misunderstood spinster of *Ladies in Lavender*? Is she like dominatrix spymaster 'M' in the Bond movies, or the fabulously coquettish Lady Bracknell? High-octane diva or pussycat?
>
> (Hastings, 2006)

An audience less influenced by Dench's theatre and television roles would have a different perspective on her film roles than the majority of the British public. The latter displays a more protective attitude towards Dench's image, one that consistently sidesteps Dench's 'naughty ladies' (as she refers to some of her more recent roles) and, instead, maintains the 'saintly' and 'sweet' (Cochrane, 2009) character associated to Dench's more traditional (sitcom) roles.

National Treasure

Judi Dench is one of the most esteemed actresses (Cochrane, 2009; Teeman, 2009): loved by the public (as illustrated by the polls); respected and admired by her fellow actors, as the endearing contributions to *Darling Judi* (Miller, 2004) signal.[101] The most prominent theme identified within the discourse around Dench is however, her 'national treasure' status. This expression is consistently mentioned in recent articles about and interviews with Judi Dench,[102] although as early as 1995, Melvyn Bragg wrote 'I am afraid she is in grave danger of becoming a national treasure' (1995). Despite Judi Dench's resistance, her 'national treasure' status is well established now.

Dench's persistent refusal of that label is apparent in those same articles and interviews: '"I hate that." But why? "Too dusty, too in a cupboard, too behind glass, too staid," she said' (Gold, 2009). Or, in another:

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[101] Organised in honour of her seventieth birthday by biographer John Miller, this volume collects testimonies by her peers, including actors and directors alike (Miller, 2004).
[102] The list is vast; see, for instance: (Anonymous, 2008a; 2008b; Child, 2009; Cochrane, 2009; Gold, 2009; Sandhu, 2007; Shoard, 2009; Teeman, 2009).

> [Dench] would like it to be known that she is nobody's national treasure. She may be one of our most esteemed actresses, but she begs that we divest ourselves of the twinkly, matronly image we have of her.
>
> (Teeman, 2009)

Dench's use of words is an indication of the ageist undertones she identifies in the 'national treasure discourse', and the constraining public image it promotes. Dench has every reason to hate the national treasure status. As Gold suggests, there 'is only one reason why a mere celebrity is promoted to national treasure. Pity' (2009). In Judi Dench's case, as Gold suggests, the loss of her husband coincided with this ascension to national treasure (2009).

As clarified in her biography, the year everyone remembers as the one when Dench received an Oscar is remembered for other more personal reasons (Dench, 2010). Michael's health deteriorated and he was diagnosed with lung cancer. Staying home to nurse him was one of the few periods off work Judi Dench allowed herself. Her husband passed away in January 2001 and, after only a month, Judi Dench started filming on three films in succession, 'and at one point I was altering (sic) between the shooting of two of them' (Dench, 2010, p203). These films were *The Shipping News*, *Iris* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Parker, 2002).

Within the British cultural landscape a vast amount of intertextual and extra-diegetic information about this actress' personal life and career is available. Judi Dench's marriage to Michael Williams has been described as one of the 'closest and most enduring' marriages in show business (Marks, 1999). In addition to their individual careers, they appeared as a fictional couple in the series *A Fine Romance* (1980-1983), one of the surest ways

to make their way into 'public consciousness' (Nathan, 2002). The personal tragedy of her husband's fight against cancer and Judi Dench's loss upon his death became a public affair (Watson-Smyth, 2001) and contributed to the feeling of affection and protectiveness her image inspires in fans and peers.

Gold's link between a collective pity and the 'national treasure' status (2009) points towards an underlying discourse of ageism and sexism. The national treasure status is, according to Gold 'like benevolent cement, or consignment to an Alcatraz full of beige sofas. […] We have you in our warm collective fist, and we will not let go' (2009).

Dench's rejection of this label, her refusal to be confined by the 'benevolent cement' of her loving fans, is not only a refusal to being defined by her widowhood; it signals a resistance towards traditional female gender roles and age-appropriate behaviour norms. As an actress, she reacts against ageist stereotypes by embracing variety; and this openness to different types of roles allows the actress who performed almost every Shakespeare play to join Vin Diesel in the action/fantasy flick *The Chronicles of Riddick* (Twohy, 2004).[103] As Dench declares in an interview, 'I always want to do the most different thing I can think of next. I don't want to be known for one thing' (Teeman, 2009).

The phenomenon described in the following section, the 'Judi Dench Factor,' does however confirm that Dench' public image is tied to sexist and ageist notions of appropriateness (Wood, 1971). This is to such an extent

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[103] Dench's Aereon is 'an envoy from a race of spiritual beings.' This film role has been characterised as one of her 'less credible ones' (Cochrane, 2009), but Dench recalls the experience of a fantastic set and admirable special effects (Dench, 2010).

that certain behaviours and words are considered unacceptable – even when uttered by a fictional character.

The 'Judi Dench Factor'

The 2008 British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) report provides insight into a curious phenomenon by which star and character seem indissoluble in Dench's case – the so called 'Judi Dench factor.' According to the 2008 BBFC report, there are a considerable number of complaints every time one of Dench's characters swears, regardless of the film's classification.[104]

This trend was noted on occasion of the last Bond film, *Quantum of Solace* (Forster, 2008),[105] which with a 12A rating would not normally have been expected to attract complaints.[106] The number of letters was attributed to the 'Judi Dench factor' since it is her character M who utters the objectionable words ('pretty cold bastard' and 'shit'). Catherine Shoard expands on this report by referring to the confluence of character and actress in Dame Judi's case:

> On the surface this seems just another example of people muddling an actor and a role, a celebrity and an acquaintance. The tone of the letters – 'it's not appropriate for her' – also suggests cinemagoers now feel enfranchised enough not only to express an opinion, but also to act as unpaid counsel to their favourite star.
>
> (Shoard, 2009)

What this episode confirms is that Dench's public perception is aligned with regulatory notions of age and gender conformity. Although these

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[104] See BBFC *2008 Annual Report*: http://www.bbfc.co.uk/downloads/, see also:
http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/8116208.stm;
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/celebritynews/5617208/Judi-Dench-swear-words-always-spark-complaints.html;
http://www.mirror.co.uk/celebs/latest/2009/06/23/complaints-over-dench-film-language-115875-21466299/.
[105] For a brief description of each of the Bond films mentioned, see appendix 1.
[106] Two years before, the BBFC report stated that *Casino Royal* was the most complained about film of 2006 – with '82 complaints in 2006 and they were still coming in at the beginning of 2007. The majority were about the level of violence in the film [...]'
http://www.bbfc.co.uk/download/annual-reports/BBFC_AnnualReport_2006.pdf.

complaint letters are manifestations of fandom, they are actually examples of the policing of gender and age-appropriate behaviours. 'Not appropriate for her,' or 'at her age' are well-known phrases that resonate with the strict regularisation of chronological ageing and socially acceptable patterns of behaviour for each age which structure our culture. These patterns prescribe the progression towards maturity by following well-defined norms of behaviour, attire, relationships, language, and so forth, which should always be age-appropriate (Wood, 1971). And since gender and age identity are closely interlinked, the enforcement of a specific conduct and appearance for the female gender tends to become more rigorous as age progresses.

In other words, *not appropriate for* 'Dame Judi' actually means *not appropriate for a woman of her age*. This ageist perception of Judi Dench's star image means that appropriate roles for her consist of the stereotypical 'Little Old Lady' (Copper, 1997, p122) image, erasing her individuality. The actress' reaction to the 'Judi Dench factor' episode expresses this concern:

> That upset me terribly, because I thought, in a way, that cancelled out the last 52 years. I thought 'Does nobody ever believe anything I do? Can't they for a minute think that I am playing another person, in another world, with another personality? Must they write and complain that it came out of my mouth?' I was very depressed about it.
> (Cochrane, 2009)

Dench is the first one to point out that the public's perception is at odds with the variety of subversive female characters she played along the years: 'There have been lots of parts I have played that are deeply unpleasant. I wouldn't say that Lady Macbeth is frightfully nice' (Jones, 2007). It seems that the star image of an actress in her seventies is indissoluble from an

ageist and sexist discourse. What I would like to focus on in the following section is the contrast between this public image and what I identify as a common denominator of (subtle) transgression throughout her film roles.

Judi Dench on Film

In their study of contemporary screen images of women *Hollywood Divas, Indie Queens, and TV Heroines*, Kord and Krimmer (2005) include Judi Dench as one of the 'Hidden Alternatives.' Kord and Krimmer argue that 'The Grand Dame of Cameos' Judi Dench presents an alternative to the stereotypical roles conventionally ascribed to women in Hollywood cinema. In a context of contradictory messages directed at women – gendered stereotyping alongside 'images of empowerment, confirmation, and comfort' (2005, p9) – some alternatives can be found at the margins:

> Supporting roles in major movies or major roles in indie films turn the spotlight on women whose age, body, or personality type makes them ineligible to play the young, pretty, and perfectly proportioned blockbuster heroine.
>
> (Kord and Krimmer, 2005, p113)

As seen in previous chapters, these supporting roles are similarly the place where older lesbian characters are located, seen that their age and sexual identity make them twice ineligible to become a blockbuster heroine. According to Kord and Krimmer, Judi Dench presents a series of alternatives, her roles providing rarely seen images of women, such as M's authority, 'cool distance and elegant poise' (2005, p116) and Dench's 'awe inspiring' queens (p117) – Queen Victoria in *Mrs Brown* (1997) and Queen Elizabeth I in *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

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Dench's film roles reveal a *Leitmotif* of subversion which has not gone unnoticed despite the predominant 'national treasure' discourse. Shoard addresses this ambivalence in her article, noting that,

> even cosier recent roles are less innocuous than they might appear. Mrs Henderson was, after all, was [sic] the Peter Stringfellow[107] of her day […]. Even in thesp-fest *Ladies in Lavender*, Dench's Cornish spinster was driven actually insane with ravenous lust for Daniel Bruhl's young Pole.
>
> (2009)

Most of her film characters can be described as 'naughty ladies'[108] – they embody her personal struggle to gain distance from more traditional, 'dusty', female gender norms. They represent aspirations of change; transgress age-appropriate behaviours, heteronormative boundaries and even the Bond formula meta-narratives.

'At her Age!': Moments of Transgression

By focusing on her performances in feature film, I propose to challenge Judi Dench's public star image by highlighting an inherent *Leitmotif* of subversion, extending (chronologically) from M in the 1995 *GoldenEye* to her 2009 role as Mona Carvell in *Rage*. A brief outline of how her female characters can be seen as challenging certain social conventions will set up my argument about the transgressive potential of Dench's screen persona. Each of these roles presents a different kind of transgression of age- and gender-appropriate behaviour patterns, providing the background for my final objective of presenting a lesbian appropriation of M.

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[107] Peter Stringfellow is the owner of several London nude dancing clubs (my note).
[108] 'More Naughty Ladies' is the title of the 2006-2009 section in her autobiography (Dench, 2010).

Dench's royal and aristocratic roles are more aligned with her status as 'national treasure' – her star image conferring the power and status of these figures who themselves constitute English heritage. As Street argues, there is a close link between theatre, or literary heritage in general, and British National cinema (2009, p152). Dench can be considered a 'heritage star', embodying Britain's 'literary and theatrical heritage' (Street, 2009, p155), for instance in the film *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2000) where she returns to a role she previously performed on stage.

Judi Dench inaugurates her more prominent set of roles by playing the two most influential English queens, women in a position of authority, defiant of patriarchy. Consistent with her film persona, her queens are the best example of 'the lonely woman at the top' (Kord and Krimmer, 2005, p115). They combine strength with vulnerability and reveal the limitations of mainstream representations of strong, independent women as Kord and Kimmer posit: 'the harsh juxtaposition of Elizabeth or Victoria as a queen and as a woman (a friend or a lover) shows that in Hollywood's worldview, femininity and authority are still incompatible' (2005, p119).

In *Mrs Brown* (1997), Judi Dench (aged 63) performs Queen Victoria (in her forties). Set in 1864, it portrays Queen Victoria's slow recovery from a long period of mourning for her husband, Prince Albert (who had died in 1861). Victoria is a woman in a position of power, whose private life (mourning and then her friendship with Brown) had to be sacrificed in the interest of public responsibility as a monarch.

In *Shakespeare in Love*, Dench plays the role of another monarch, an older Queen Elizabeth. Her brief supporting role (around eight minutes of

screen time) won her the Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role (as mentioned above). Of relevance in this context is that Dench who is a 'heritage star' (see Higson, 2003; Street, 2009) is here aligned with English heritage in the form of two of Britain's great queens. These roles establish a through line and link with the portrayal with another woman in authority I will focus on later, M.

Other 'aristocratic' roles, such as, Lady Bracknell in *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice* (Wright, 2005) represent tradition, social convention and the strict delimitations of class belongings which stand as hindrance to the pursuit of marriage for love. Although authoritative women, in terms of gender politics they are reactionary. None of the above mentioned roles can be seen as 'frightfully nice' (Jones, 2007).

Then there are Dench's non-aristocratic characters. In *Tea with Mussolini* (Zeffirelli, 1999), Dench plays a minor supporting role as Arabella, an eccentric, good-hearted artist. Arabella is part of a group of women who, in this 'tale of civil disobedience', took a stance against the Italian Carabinieri and the Nazi officers themselves, protecting their community and the Italian works of art they valued so much during the years of WWII. Judi Dench's role in *Chocolat* (Hallström, 2000) is that of the seventy-year-old Armande Voizin (Dench was 66), who refuses to be sent into a care facility for the elderly, as her daughter insists. Armande defies social conventions, age-appropriate compliance, and establishes a friendship with other less respected members of the community as they unite against the laws of propriety imposed by *le Comte*.

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Two of her roles can be paired thematically. In *Mrs Henderson Presents* (Frears, 2005), Judi Dench (aged 72) plays Laura Henderson (1864-1944), the owner of the historical Windmill Theatre in London. Wealthy Mrs Henderson (in her late sixties) has recently lost her husband. Together with theatre manager Mr Vivian Van Damm, they stage 'fine art style' nude dancing shows, an occupation that can be seen as both gender- and age-inappropriate within this particular historical context and Mrs Henderson's social circle. Four years later, Judi's character is the one taking the stage as Lilli, the Parisian costume designer and counsellor to director Guido (Daniel Day-Lewis) in Marshall's musical *Nine* (2009). Lilli performs the musical number 'Folies Bergère' in cabaret corset with a black pair of trousers (see figure 19). It is difficult to establish the age of the character she portrays, but this is an example of an unusual role for an actress in her seventies.

Figure 19 – Judi Dench as Lilli, performing 'Folies Bergère' in *Nine* (Marshall, 2009)

All these roles project different images of Judi Dench although I identify a *Leitmotif* of subtle or open transgression of ageing femininity, and by extension sexuality, power and desire. Dench has indeed been described (by Richard Eyre) as containing many paradoxes: 'she's hard-headed but big-hearted, subversive but respectful of tradition, insecure but defiant in the

face of fear, wildly passionate but almost always temperate' (see: Miller, 2004, p38). In light of this description and of the characters briefly described above, Dench's signature persona can more appropriately be identified as the 'no-nonsense, strong-willed woman' (Chagollan, 2006).

'Oh, have I shocked you? Good!'

The characters discussed in the present section are, with the exception of Ursula, contemporary women. Although, as Street argues, the 'heritage genre has spilled over into representations of Englishness which are not necessarily set in the past' (2009, p123), in this case the link with costume drama seems lost and Dench's characters are allowed to be edgier and more subversive of conventional behaviour (and desires).

In *Rage*, there is no interaction between the characters that succeed each other in direct to camera address. Judi Dench's character introduces herself to Michelangelo (the fictional boy behind the camera, who is recording contributions for his weblog) – 'Mona Carvell, writer, critic'. Mona is a fashion critic, and in the following scene, casually admits to having used heroin:

> But fashion is not an art form. If it's anything at all, it's pornography ... To which millions are addicted [...]. It's a crazed lust of a desperate junkie... It's much worse than heroin, take it from me. Oh, have I shocked you? Good!
>
> *Rage* (2009)

© Rage (Potter, 2009)

Figure 20 – A 'national treasure' smoking a joint:
Mona (Judi Dench) in *Rage* (Potter, 2009)

This last expression gains significance after a subsequent scene in which, without initially uttering a word, Mona lights what appears to be a joint (with a revolver-shaped lighter) and slowly blows out the smoke (see figure 20). Visualising a 'national treasure' smoking a joint (at age 76) is a perfect example of the ambivalence I refer to and illustrates the transgressive potential I ascribe to Dench's persona. Mona's words 'Oh, have I shocked you? Good!' could easily be ascribed to her as an actress. Dench acknowledges that her roles are subversive. In an interview, she refers to her experience on the set of *Rage*:

> She was attracted to working with British arthouse director Sally Potter, and the fact that it was unlike anything she'd done before. 'I like to do something that's not expected, or predictable. I had to learn to smoke a joint, and I set my trousers alight. I've never been good with cigarettes.'
>
> (Cochrane, 2009)

Other such moments, in which Judi Dench's conventional star image and her character's 'disgraceful' behaviour collide, can be found throughout her most recent film roles. *The Shipping News* and *Notes on a Scandal* have already been discussed in previous chapters. One scene from the former serves to illustrate a specific transgressive moment, as in *Rage* (smoking a

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joint), rather than a subversive character or narrative. In a very brief and discrete scene in *The Shipping News*, Agnis Hamm takes revenge on her incestuous brother by throwing his ashes down the outhouse toilet and urinating on them. The gesture is suggested rather than depicted but can be listed under performances that subvert the idea of Dench as 'national treasure'.

In relation to *Notes on a Scandal*, Judi Dench acknowledges that her role as Barbara could banish her reputation as a 'saintly' 'national treasure': 'I think that gave it a bit of a boot' (Cochrane, 2009). As shown in the previous chapter, Barbara challenges notions of asexual old age and of heteronormativity. Barbara is subversive of traditional images of ageing femininity by embodying non-heterosexual desire and choosing age-inappropriate objects of desire – thus transgressing boundaries of age and gender.

Set in mid-1930s Cornwall, *Ladies in Lavender* (Dance, 2004) is again a heritage style film. This heritage 'feel', intensified by the backdrop of the idyllic Cornish coast, intensifies the subversiveness of Ursula's (Dench) age-inappropriate desire.[109] The *Ladies in Lavender* are two sisters, Ursula and Janet (Maggie Smith) who rescue young musician Andrea (Daniel Brühl), washed ashore near their family house. Ursula, portrayed as the unmarried, 'old maid' living with her sister, falls in love with the young stranger thus transgressing the asexual expectations attached to the identity of an older woman. Ursula looks longingly at the young man and as he sleeps she stands by his bedside and touches his hair. The extent of her

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[109] See Moseley for a detailed analysis of the relationship between the landscape and this character's desire (2010).

infatuation becomes apparent to her sister when Ursula exclaims jealously 'I was the one who saw him first.' Ursula's desire is age-inappropriate and her love, just as in *Notes on a Scandal*, unreciprocated. In this film, however, only the age boundary was transgressed and Ursula's (heterosexual) behaviour can be dismissed as the childish fascination of a lonely spinster by her sister as well as Andrea.

So far, I have argued that the discourse around Judi Dench's public image as a heritage star comprises conventional, ageist and sexist notions of appropriateness. Judi's personal refusal of this restrictive image, in combination with her subversive film characters, encourages an alternative take on her star image. In what follows, I argue that on the internet, a less regulated discourse around Judi Dench is constructed, in the form of online forums and celebrity gossip. These marginal discourse formations can be seen to inform transgressive reading practices.

Lesbian Viewing Strategies: Appropriating Judi Dench

Sheldon claims that strong, independent and sensitive female characters are popular with lesbians (1980, pp17, 23). Whatling argues along the same lines, stating that strong film heroines present identificatory possibilities and 'an attractive role-model for the lesbian viewer to embrace if she so wishes' (1994, p185). In a study about lesbian interpretative strategies, Dobinson and Young found that their respondents 'identified with and/or desired strong, defiant, or deviant (heterosexual) heroines because of a lack of lesbian characters in film, and because they are automatically categorized as deviant by society due to their sexuality' (2000, p109).

I previously argued that Dench's characters share a subversive strand, an element of strength and defiance. I deferred an analysis of Dench's role as M to this section, but her participation in *GoldenEye* corresponded to the first of a series of transgressive female roles. As suggested before, this inherent defiance constitutes a fundamental though usually marginalised characteristic of Judi Dench's public image.

In addition to the more 'protective' contexts of her biographies (Miller, 1999; 2004), autobiographies (Dench, 2010; Dench and Miller, 2005), fan websites[110] and articles in the mainstream press, Judi Dench figures in alternative contexts, such as online discussion forums for Bond fans or lesbian audiences. By locating Dench within these alternative spheres I intend to create the opportunity to read Dench's characters 'against the grain' of a preferred ageist and heteronormative discourse.

It has been argued that certain stars acquire different meanings for certain groups. Tessa Perkins examined 'the process by which star-images come to mean something to particular groups' (1991, p237) by analysing Jane Fonda. Richard Dyer used the same star image to illustrate the structured polysemy of the star, 'the multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies' (1998, p63). If a star image is constituted by what is written about her, as Dyer maintains (2004, p3), alternative sources can be considered (outside of the mainstream press) in order to uncover more diverse meanings. Judi Dench's image is strongly associated with the particular look of the elfin haircuts of the 1990s and her role as M in the

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[110] Such as the *Dame Judi Dench's Career*, see: http://www.djdchronology.com/djdsitemap.htm.

Bond films; this image is disrupted by her later roles, in particular by Barbara Covett (*Notes on a Scandal*).

Celebrity Gossip and Online Forums

Long before today's celebrity gossip (online) magazines, rumours around certain Hollywood stars – such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo and Katherine Hepburn – played an important part in the formation of a lesbian identity in the 1930s. Andrea Weiss argues that this process by which audiences were able to appropriate certain stars and/or particular cinematic moments by rejecting the preferred reading in favour of lesbian interpretations 'was especially important for lesbian spectators in the 1930s, who rarely saw their desire given expression on the screen' (1992, p35). The veracity of these rumours and whether 'these actresses were actually lesbian or bisexual is less relevant than how their star personae were perceived by lesbian audiences' (Weiss, 1992, p33). Thereby Weiss shows how, despite the dominant discourse of heteronormativity in cinema, 'lesbian spectators have been able to appropriate cinematic moments which seem to offer resistance to the dominant patriarchal ideology, and to use these points of resistance and the shared language of gossip and rumor to, in some measure, define and empower themselves' (1992, p50).

White concurs, arguing that '[r]eading formations evolve in relation to extra-cinematic practices such as gossip and subcultural codes' (1999, p. xviii). For despite the hegemonic, heteronormative meanings inscribed in the Bond films, these rumours assume a life of their own and distinguish certain characters or films as being of 'lesbian interest'. Whatling argues

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that gossip informs this kind of 'double-layered knowledge, the official text and the lesbian and gay subtext' (1997, p117).

Similarly to the rumours surrounding film stars, what matters is not whether this character is a lesbian or not, the mere circulation of the possibility generates a dialogue and lively discussions on fan-forums that eventually appear on less specialised platforms of online communication.[111]

Judi Dench: a Lesbian Icon?

As stated throughout this dissertation, Dench has a repertoire of queer characters – a lesbian in *The Shipping News*, a bisexual in *Iris* and the (arguably) queer Barbara in *Notes on a Scandal*. The fact that she played these characters has certainly placed her under the radar of gay audiences. The name of Judi Dench made its way into online discussion forums and has become a habitué in the online magazine *AfterEllen*, whose writers and registered members follow her avidly. On other websites, Judi Dench is considered a lesbian icon (figure 21)[112] or regarded as 'hot' (see figure 22).[113]

> **Re: So who would you pick as a lesbian icon?**
>
> I would have to say Dame Judi Dench as the lesbian in 'The Shipping News' and Virginia Wolfe
>
> Posted: 24-Jun-2006

Figure 21 – Identifying Dench as a role model (screenshot
from *The Pink Sofa* online forum, www.pinksofa.com)

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[111] A good illustration of this is actress Jodie Foster, who is a constant presence in writings about lesbian reading strategies (Graham, 1994; Hankin, 1998; MacKey, 2001; Smyth, 1995; Whatling, 1997). Rumours about her sexual orientation were supposedly confirmed by what was seen as a 'coming-out' moment during an acceptance speech in 2007. See: http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/filmblog/2007/dec/11/jodiefostercomesoutatlast; and http://www.afterellen.com/people/2007/12/jodiefoster.
[112] Available at: ww.pinksofa.com/guest/toast/toast.asp?sub=show&action=posts&fid=185&tid=166657&page=3, (Accessed 15 February 2011).
[113] Available at: http://www.ministryofburlesque.com/off-topic/5133-whos-got.html, (Accessed 15 February 2011).

Figure 22 – Discussing Dench's sex appeal (screenshot from
Ministry of Burlesque online forum, www.ministryofburlesque.com)

According to Lawrence Ferber, Dench's status as a lesbian icon is
undeniable (2002). In an interview, for gay and lesbian newsmagazine *The
Advocate*, Judi Dench is informed of her status:

> In fact, she seems quite startled to hear of her exalted status with her
> gay fans. 'An icon?' she exclaims. 'No, no, no, certainly not!' Told
> she's not just a lesbian icon but a sexy lesbian icon at that, Dench
> bursts into warm laughter. 'Oh, I like the sexy bit!' she says. 'Thanks
> for passing it on! I'm very interested! But don't make too much of that.
> I'm 67 – I can't be that innocent!'
>
> (Ferber, 2002)

In another *Advocate* article published the same year, Dench's haircut is
mentioned: 'On a lighter note, we think Dame Judi has the world's best
lesbian hair (which she used earlier this year to play an actual lesbian in
The Shipping News)' (Duralde, 2002).

While Dench's hair is praised as 'the best lesbian hair' by Duralte, in
other contexts having 'lesbian hair' is not as appreciated. On a Bond fan
website, several users discuss M's looks in *Quantum of Solace* (2008) as
compared to her first appearance in *GoldenEye* (see figure 23, below), one

user writes that she 'looked horrid [...]. She reminded me of some kind of tightarse lesbian.'[114] Lesbian here obviously is used as meaning old and unattractive, expressed through the 'bad lesbian hair stereotype' (Akass and McCabe, 2006, p111). What I would like to highlight, however, is the fact that she is read as a lesbian outside of a lesbian social media or networking website: 'Her haircut made me think that she was a lesbian'.[115]

Judi Dench has always had a short or medium hair length, and she is famous for her pixie haircut. But these comments arise in relation to a specific character, namely M. In this role she plays a woman in a position of power, whose trademark short haircut (not dissimilar to Dench's own when not on screen) adds to her perceived masculinity. The assumption seems to be that a 'bitchy' boss (who, in addition, shows no interest in Bond's charming ways) must be a lesbian. This association, although derogatory in intent, supports my own argument about reading the character M as a lesbian.

While the discussion above was confined to a specialised forum for registered users, there was one story that made its way into more visible celebrity gossip websites. In 2008, an article appears on the web announcing 'Dame Judi Dench Begins Dating Female DJ'.[116] A closer look reveals this is a parody news article published in satirical US paper *The Onion*[117] in which Lindsay Lohan's name was substituted by Judi Dench's

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[114] Forum discussion available at:
http://debrief.commanderbond.net/topic/49861-quantum-of-solace-announced-on-dvd-and-blu-ray/page__st__270__p__1003006__hl__lesbian__fromsearch__1#entry1003006 (Accessed 29th March 2011).
[115] Forum discussion available at:
http://debrief.commanderbond.net/topic/49861-quantum-of-solace-announced-on-dvd-and-blu-ray/page__st__270__p__1003006__hl__lesbian__fromsearch__1#entry1003006 (Accessed 29th March 2011).
[116] See: http://www.theonion.com/articles/dame-judi-dench-begins-dating-female-dj,2626/.
[117] From their editorial we learn that: '*The Onion* is a satirical weekly publication [...] *The Onion* uses invented names in all its stories, except in cases where public figures are being satirized. Any other use of real names is accidental and coincidental.' See: http://www.theonion.com/faq/.

(the DJ in question is Samantha Ronsen). Reproduced throughout the world wide web without stating this source, a wave of gossip about Judi Dench's sexual orientation appeared on blogs and online forums.[118] The plausibility of *The Onion*'s news story (if only momentary) certainly derives from Dench's characteristically subversive female characters, while, at the same time, encouraging practices of reading 'against the grain' of heteronormativity. As argued by Jenkins, alternative texts are valuable in reworking normative meanings:

> Yet, just as feminists have begun to reassess the potential strengths of 'gossip' as a means of communication by and for women, we need to reconsider the importance of 'trivia' as unauthorized and unpoliced knowledge existing outside academic institutions but a source of popular expertise for the fans and a basis for critical reworkings of textual materials.
>
> (1992, p87)

As Dobinson and Young maintain, the 'existence of extra-textual information, such as rumour or hope that some of a film's participants are lesbians, can also be a source of lesbian pleasure in viewing' (2000, p101). In the tradition of these reading practices I propose a lesbian appropriation of M, challenging an essentially youth-oriented convention of queering characters and storylines.

Appropriating M

For a public familiar with the previous (male) M – played by Bernard Lee, Robert Brown and Edward Fox – the casting of M as a woman must have presented a significant alteration. The Bond films were not an overnight

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[118] See: 'Judi Dench is Gay?!', available at http://youbettarecognize.blogspot.com/2008/12/judi-dench-is-gay.html [Accessed 22 March 2011]; or http://www.thedailyswarm.com/headlines/dame-judi-dench-begins-dating-female-dj-theyre-definitely-each-other/.

success, they slowly emerged as a commercial success (Street, 2002). Part of this success was the Bond formula, including Moneypenny, Q and M. As Street notes, 'Bond's superiors are "establishment" figures with accents to match' (2002, p189).

Dench has the matching accent but the fact that she is a woman is cause for some tension. The introduction of her character in *GoldenEye* is disruptive of the diegetic patriarchal order (and of the extra-diegetic order, the Bond formula). As I will argue, M challenges conventions and her strength, defiance and deviance make her susceptible to a lesbian reading (Dobinson and Young, 2000, p109). Moments of resistance and disruption are few; M is a supporting role and her screen time throughout the four Brosnan-era Bond films (1995-2002) comprise a total of 32 minutes. Although her character is given more weight in the Craig-era films (2006-2008), this aspect limits the appropriation of her character considerably.

Despite this limitation in terms of cinematic screen time, M's appearances extend over more than a decade (1995-2008), two Bond actors (Pierce Brosnan and Daniel Craig) and five directors. This time span allows for a vast amount of extra-diegetic and intertextual information to circulate. The types of rumours and speculation mentioned above add an intertextual layer of 'lesbian' meaning to M and, potentially, other Dench characters.

The intertextual knowledge of the contemporary viewer creates an awareness of certain elements which can be interpreted in a new light. Online archives and knowledge sites such as *imdb.com* and *Wikipedia* add to this knowledge encouraging and making accessible a process of

retrospectatorship (White, 1999). Revisiting, or viewing any of the Bond films for the first time, with the knowledge of Judi's 'lesbian' roles can bring another layer of signification to M. As White posits a 'later experience of queer knowledge and desire makes the affective memory meaningful' (1999, p.xiii).

Nataf has argued that queer readings are 'as dependent on intertextual information that the spectator brings to bear on the film as on a queer subtext' (1995, p69). Whatling argues that in order to appropriate a film, it does not necessarily have to contain a (lesbian) subtext: 'there is no such thing as a lesbian film. Films are rather lesbianised by the individual' (1997, p5). Although interpretation lies 'largely (though not exclusively) with the desire of the spectator' (Whatling, 1997, p6), certain elements facilitate appropriation of characters, actresses, or storylines.

As I suggest, the possibility of a lesbian reading depends, however, on a negotiation between the predominant (heteronormative) meaning of the film text and its 'moments of resistance and disruption' (Jermyn, 1996, p266; also see: Mackey, 2001). The preferred meaning as constructed by the film text is generated by employing traditional markers of heterosexuality: M's reference to children in *GoldenEye* and the presence of a man next to her in bed in *Casino Royale* (Campbell, 2006). Having children, however, is not indication of heterosexuality in itself, but that culturally the identity 'mother' is usually indissociable from it. Despite the evidence of an extensive number of lesbian mothers, lesbian motherhood continues to be culturally understood, and is 'often depicted as an oxymoron' (Hequembourg and Farrell, 1999, p541). The moments of disruption I intend to highlight across

several Bond films concern M's feminist discourse, her allegiance with Moneypenny and her female masculinity, as perceived from an intertextually informed viewer position.

GoldenEye: Enter Dame Judi

Six years after Timothy Dalton's last Bond, *Licence to Kill* (Glen, 1989), Pierce Brosnan was introduced as the new '007' in *GoldenEye*. Several authors argue that *GoldenEye* consists of a modernisation of the Bond formula, including technology, new enemies, and female characters (Britton, 2005, pp198-199). Indeed, one of the main innovations is that of 'increasingly complex female roles as equals, superiors, and enemies' (Garland, 2009, p184). Bond's 'clash with modernity' (Gauntlett, 2002, p49) is illustrated by the strained relationship with his boss M, who is now 'an authoritative woman' (2002, p49). The mere fact that M was cast as a woman, and older woman as it is, transgresses the Bond formula itself. With a sharp feminist discourse shielding her from the sexist framework she is placed in, M subverts many of the conceptions of traditional female gender as passive and defenceless, embodying instead power and control, even though she has to assert her position repeatedly.

Figure 23 – A moment of tension between M (Judi Dench) and
Bond (Pierce Brosnan) in *GoldenEye* (Campbell, 1995)

In the audio commentary to *GoldenEye* the director Martin Campbell and Michael G. Wilson (co-producer) mention their decision 'to make the women a little tougher, a little more independent, aggressive – in all departments' (1995). In line with this decision to modernise the Bond formula and supposedly inspired by the appointment of Stella Rimmington as the director-general of MI5 (between 1992 and 1996), it was suggested to 'make' M a woman. Notwithstanding this recent appointment of a woman to a similar post of command, 'stepping outside of what had gone before' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995) within the Bond universe was considered a bold move. The solution was in the casting – 'If you do get a woman, get a star' (Campbell and Wilson, 1995). The star chosen was Judi Dench.

In *GoldenEye*, her character is introduced to a tense environment of male complicity (Tanner, Bond and the legacy of her male predecessor). The obvious implications in terms of gender politics are illustrated by the palpable tension between M and her subordinates Bill Tanner and James Bond, who doubt her methods and priorities: an 'accountant has replaced the old M, who stood for England's imperial past' (Britton, 2005, p199). In

her first scene, M enters the room just in time to overhear Tanner refer to her as the 'evil queen of numbers' to which she crisply retorts 'if I want sarcasm, Mr Tanner, I'll talk to my children, thank you very much' before ordering him to continue the briefing.

The gender 'swap' of the head of the British Secret Services is not smoothed over. M's first appearance interrupts a scene of male banter between Tanner and Bond, representatives of the patriarchal structure of the Bond-universe. What is significant is that M effectively silences Tanner with a retort containing a reference to her children. However, by identifying as a mother, M does not become maternal in the sense of motherly and affectionate; rather, this reference to her children evokes the maternal as transgressive in line with the construction of the maternal body as abject (Creed, 1993; Shildrick, 2002). M's *entree* is thus strongly associated to the symbols of female transgression of the heteropatriarchal order. Tanner's expression 'evil queen of numbers', on the other hand, calls to mind an expression mentioned earlier in this thesis, namely the 'evil lesbian' (Becker *et al.*, 1995; Buchanan, 2007). Both characters – the 'evil queen' M and the 'evil lesbian' Barbara Covett – are performed by Judi Dench and it is this underlying quality of transgression that sustains my analysis of Dench's characters as 'lesbianisable' throughout this chapter.

The camera is static, on a double shot of Bond and Tanner, while M walks in through a door behind them, moving towards the camera up to a medium close up, with the two male characters framing M, placed in the middle. By taking over the screen, M symbolically interrupts a male

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dominated sphere. The dialogue proceeds in a reverse shot which places M opposite Tanner and Bond, thus accentuating their antagonism.

In a later scene, set in M's office, she offers Bond a drink. Bond attempts to display prior and insider information by saying, 'Your predecessor kept some cognac in the top drawer of-' – but is sharply interrupted – 'I prefer bourbon. Ice?' M hereby avoids any association with her predecessor, disregarding Bond and, affirming her own choices (of methods and drinks). M interrupts Tanner and Bond, claiming her presence and voice, dispelling the legacy of her (male) predecessor.

M and Bond dislike each other, as illustrated in the following dialogue, in which M expresses her antagonism through gender politics discourse, asserting her authority against Bond's insolence:

> M: You don't like me, Bond. You don't like my methods. You think I'm an accountant. A bean counter. More interested in numbers than in your instincts.
> BOND: The thought had occurred to me.
> M: Good. Because I think you're a sexist, misogynist dinosaur. A relic of the cold war whose boyish charms, wasted on me, obviously appealed to that young woman I sent out to evaluate you.
> BOND: Point taken.
> M: Not quite. If you think for one moment I don't have the balls to send a man out to die, you're instinct's dead wrong. I have no compunction about sending you to your death. But I won't do it on a whim. Even with your cavalier attitude towards life.

GoldenEye (1995)

M's Reception

The choice of introducing a female M is recurrently placed within the larger context of other changes introduced with *GoldenEye*, such as a new type of villain or fiercer Bond girls. Internet forums are replete with discussions around the choice of a female M and the casting of Judi Dench. Reviews of

GoldenEye inevitably refer to the 'sexist, misogynous dinosaur' speech (transcribed above), and opinions about a female M and the casting of Dench are divided. One reviewer points out that Bond's dated charms are what make him popular in the first place:

> M is now an iron maiden played by Judi Dench, who brings Bond and the house down with her greeting, "I think you're a sexist, misogynous dinosaur." At last report, dinosaurs were quite popular, and one of the charms of watching this refitted Bond is that women give him a hard time - but still end up going for him in a big way.
>
> <div align="right">(McCarthy, 1995)</div>

Ingram remarks that Dench was miscast, arguing that Dench's star image as incompatible with the role as M, the reason being that she is 'a national treasure, much loved and cherished [...]. But she hardly seems the sort of person who is going to put the fear of God into Smersh or al-Qa'ida' (Ingrams, 2009).

M as a Feminist

The reiteration of the 'dinosaur speech' consistently places M within a feminist discourse – whether in reviews in which this choice is identified as political correctness (Falk, 1995) or where the mutability of the Bond film is praised (Mars-Jones, 1997).

By accusing Bond of being a 'sexist, misogynist dinosaur' M becomes a feminist character, voicing (extra-diegetic) feminist concerns about the representation of women in the Bond films. M represents the break with certain conventions within the Bond franchise, and embodies an alternative for older women in film. M's power does not derive from her sexuality – it is her competence, her professional caution and calculation of risk and reliability of information that make her eligible for this position. Not only is

she Bond's superior – and therefore presenting an image of female power – situating herself beyond Bond's hyper-heterosexual seductive powers, his 'boyish charms' wasted on her – she presents both an alternative to the sexualised female characters of mainstream film and allows for lesbian identifications, both as a figure of authority and as an older woman, who is not presented in a stereotypical manner:

> M's cool distance and elegant poise counterbalance all the buxom females caving in to the hero's irresistible sex appeal. She is a rock of authority in a sea of writhing female bodies.
>
> (Kord and Krimmer, 2005, p116)

Although Dench seems reluctant to identify as a feminist,[119] the fictional character M has become a feminist symbol, not only as a vehicle of representational change within the Bond universe, but as an actual voice for a feminist campaign. A video released in 2011, by the *We Are Equals* International Women's Day campaign,[120] features Bond (Daniel Craig) and M's voice over (Judi Dench). M questions gender equality, citing cultural assumptions and statistics that challenge the myth of achieved equality in the Western world and her tone is reminiscent of M's first appearance in *GoldenEye*.

Ms Moneypenny

In addition to a female M, another major change is the character Moneypenny. Moneypenny (played by Samantha Bond) is, in accordance with other changes for female characters in *GoldenEye*, 'less pliant than her predecessor' (Britton, 2005, p199). Moneypenny has changed and even

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[119] In one interview, Dench expresses the 'I'm not a feminist but…' principle of distancing oneself from a feminist identity while assuming pro-feminist beliefs (Williams and Wittig, 1997). When asked if she is a feminist she replies: "No, I wouldn't call myself a feminist at all, really. I don't know what a feminist is. I believe in women having a say." (Cochrane, 2009).
[120] Directed by Sam Taylor-Wood, See: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkp4t5NYzVM

'the age-old flirtation between Bond and Moneypenny takes a new turn as she mentions – albeit not seriously – that 'this kind of behaviour could qualify as sexual harassment'' (Gauntlett, 2002, p49). As Tara Brabazon elaborates in her analysis of the impact of feminism on the development of Moneypenny:

> The office dynamics changed radically. Suddenly, Moneypenny was no longer isolated in her office, but part of a feminist stronghold. M became an ally, a powerful boss who made her displeasure (and feminism) clear.
>
> (p494)

In *GoldenEye*, although M and Moneypenny do not share any screen time, their (feminist) alliance is established in both their disregard of Bond's 'boyish charms' and an acknowledgment of feminist issues (e.g. sexism, sexual harassment). In *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Spottiswoode, 1997), Moneypenny and M appear in three scenes together, and their complicity becomes apparent.

While Moneypenny is on the phone to Bond, interrupting one of his sexual escapades, M walks up from behind and overhears Moneypenny's last sentence, 'You always were a cunning linguist, James.' M's stern glare, softens as they share a sympathetic glance, and a short exchange of words:

> MONEYPENNY: Don't ask.
> M: Don't tell.

The significance of the expression 'Don't ask, don't tell' cannot be ignored.[121] And in this brief scene it is shared by two characters. It does not go unnoticed by lesbian and gay viewers.

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[121] 'Don't ask, don't tell' cannot go unnoticed, given its relevance to the policy of non-disclosure of gays in the US military (recently revoked by President Obama).

Figure 24 – Female bonding between Moneypenny (Samantha Bond)
and M (Judi Dench) in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (Spottiswoode, 1997)

Dobinson and Young suggest that films 'depicting female bonding, friendships, or associations are also considered prime sites for lesbian identification' (2000, p101). Given M's limited screen time in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (less than six minutes all scenes combined), the fact that there are three scenes she shares with Moneypenny is of relative significance. Despite their hierarchical relationship (Moneypenny is M's secretary), their interactions are collaborative. They are allies in the male-populated Bond-universe. In the last scene M appears in, they are walking side by side in a double shot, while M dictates an official declaration (figure 24). Their bonding consists of another element providing an anchor for lesbian identification.

Female Masculinity

As argued before, lesbian audiences have constructed heroines who do not officially belong to them by appropriating 'actors who've played strong, autonomous women' (Smyth, 1995, p124), such as Sigourney Weaver,

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Linda Hamilton and Jodie Foster who are 'masculinised' as protagonists (Graham, 1994, p179).

In the context of the Bond universe and the type of femininity embodied by the 'Bond Girl', M is not conventionally beautiful and by default non-feminine. As Halberstam correctly identifies, 'Bond's boss, M, is a noticeably butch older woman who calls Bond a dinosaur and chastises him for being a misogynist and a sexist' (1998, p3). Halberstam continues by stating that, in *GoldenEye* 'it is M who most convincingly performs masculinity' (1998, p4). This means that M provides the ideal elements to proceed with a lesbian reading. M's masculinity does not correspond to the 'hard' masculinity of Linda Hamilton's Sarah in *Terminator 2* (Cameron, 1991) but her position of authority and command symbolically distance her from the traditional female gender role and the heterosexual norm. By appropriating a non-lesbian character this type of reading subverts the heteronormative assumption. By appropriating an ageing character, the expectations of asexual old age, lack of desire and desirability confer an additional element of subversion.

In *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), M's attitude towards Bond has softened somewhat and their interactions are of a professional, but informal manner. M still encounters resistance, but this time tension is generated between her and Admiral Roebuck, as he accuses her of not having enough courage to be in command and making tough decisions:

> ADMIRAL ROEBUCK: With all due respect, M, sometimes I don't think you have the balls for this job.
> M: Perhaps. But the advantage is, I don't have to think with them all the time.

M's retort dismisses his male-based model of military strategy and impromptu attack, at the same time accusing him of being limited by his testosterone-based intellectual abilities. M illustrates the performance of gender in the way she chooses and adapts versions of masculinity. This performance of masculinity challenges an essentialist notion of female gender, and dismisses the postfeminist requirement of an erasure of age and androgyny.

In *Die Another Day* (Tamahori, 2002), M once more has to impose her decisions and strategies against British military and the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). As Kord and Krimmer correctly observe, M's female authority tends to be persistently undermined throughout the Bond films – 'because this M is a woman, her authority is constantly questioned: she makes mistakes, she is under attack or in captivity, and more than once, she is called on to prove that she has her team under control' (2005, p116).

'Reboot' M

In *Casino Royale* (2006), director Martin Campbell's second Bond film, along with a 'reboot' (narrative restart) of the Bond franchise, Daniel Craig is introduced as the new James Bond. A new time line is presented, as this constitutes Bond's first mission, having recently been promoted to double-O status. Major changes correspond to the absence of formulaic characters Moneypenny and Q, a Bond who relies on his body combat skills, rather than on technological gadgets, and heavily edited action sequences – the latter two characteristics intensified in *Quantum of Solace*. Garland

suggests that '[m]utability has been identified as central to the continued success of the Bond films' (2009, p187) and changing Bond's character 'has not been an obstacle to critical and commercial success' (Garland, 2009, p181). Although some reviewers identify an obvious influence:

> Barbara Broccoli [...] declares that the films have created a 'new kind of cinematic genre' in every generation. Others might argue the shows imitate rather than create a fresh style – reviewers and audiences of Casino Royale will have noticed the influence of the successful Bourne trilogy on 007.
>
> (Cornwell, 2008)

Judi Dench is the only actress to progress through to the Craig-Bond films from the Brosnan-Bond era, even though this choice goes against the logic of the 'narrative restart'. Seven years passed between the first (1995) and the last (2002) of the Brosnan-Bond films and in 2006, when she returned as M, Dench was 72 years old. I do not intend to explore the logic of the 'reboot' any further, but would like to leave the suggestion that by returning to her role as M the logic of an ageing character is subverted in what could be termed as a 'queer timeline' – in Halberstam's sense (2005) as explored in a previous chapter – appearing older at the beginning of Bond's career (Craig) than later in Bond's career (Brosnan).

M now appears in tailored black power-suits and exhibits stylishly short white hair. The technology has been updated, headquarters appear futuristic, equipped with high-tech touch screens. When M first appears in *Casino Royale*, she is storming out of a committee room, from The House of Commons, she is angry:

> M: Who the hell do they think they are? I report to the Prime Minister and even he's smart enough not to ask me what we do. Have you ever seen such a bunch of self-righteous, ass-covering prigs? They don't

care what we do; they care what we get photographed doing. And how the hell could Bond be so stupid? I give him double-O status and he celebrates by shooting up an embassy. Is the man deranged? And where the hell is he? In the old days if an agent did something that embarrassing he'd have a good sense to defect. Christ, I miss the Cold War.

Casino Royale (2006)

Figure 25 – 'Reboot' M: Dench in power suit in *Casino Royale* (Campbell, 2006)

Shortly before the release of *Casino Royale*, the rumour spread that director Martin Campbell 'nearly made M a lesbian,' according to several entertainment websites and James Bond fan forums.[122] The possibility of queering M is both aligned with and further corroborates a lesbian appropriation of this character:

But, during a scene where Judi Dench's M is seen in bed, Campbell resisted the temptation to put another woman, or a Chippendale toyboy under the covers with her, even though he says Dench was "well up for it".

(Curtis, 2006)

Lesbianism seems consistent with this character's disposition to transgress traditional gender roles – the fact that as a woman she assumes

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[122] See, for instance:
http://www.starpulse.com/news/index.php/2006/11/15/james_bond_director_nearly_made_m_a_lesb;
http://www.mi6.co.uk/news/index.php?itemid=4396&catid=2&t=dn&s=dn.

a male dominated profession, her power and authority considered non-feminine, and thus associable to a lesbian identity. Although this idea was rejected in the end, the plausibility of this fictional character's fluid sexuality perseveres in the lesbian spectator's eyes. Although M is seen sharing a bed with a man (instead of a toyboy or a woman), this glimpse into the intimate sleeping habits of Bond's boss can still be regarded as transgressive – 'at her age!'

Quantum of Solace is a direct sequel. M's participation is similarly extended. This was the film that received the complaints in relation to Judi Dench's language (through her character M) mentioned in a previous section. But despite the use of 'Damn it' and 'pretty cold bastard' M's language is less controversial than in her opening monologue of *Casino Royal*.

M's wardrobe is similar in both films, including white shirts, tailored jacket suits and an all-white suit. Her office has been modernised and MI6 headquarters in general seem more 'futuristic.' While *Casino Royal* allowed a look into M's bedroom – with a bedside-convertible-computer – in *Quantum of Solace* M's state-of-the-art gadgets include a flat screen computer screen in her bathroom with speakerphone connection to headquarters. Seeing M removing her make-up in front of a mirror, simultaneously giving instructions to her assistant Tanner and Bond over the phone, provides an interesting intersection of the professional and the personal that had not been allowed in the first three films (Brosnan era). This would seem to indicate that Dench's role as M is now so firmly established that it becomes permissible to allow more personal aspects to

be revealed, including such a characteristically feminine gesture as removing make-up. After all, it takes the authority of an actress such as Judi Dench combined with the power of a character such as M to command Bond while wearing a beige dressing gown.

Judi Dench's Alternative

As shown in previous chapters, images of the older woman in film can be classified according to two available modes of representation, the first deriving from the 'ageing as decline' perspective; the second comprising images of 'positive ageing'. The latter type of representations presents a refreshing alternative to the negative ageist stereotypes prevalent in popular culture. This celebration of the 'sexy oldie' – as illustrated in the 'older bird chick flick' genre (Tally, 2006; 2008) – presents however another problem. It embraces a youth-centred postfeminist cultural framework, in combination with the normative assumptions of successful ageing, and thus produces several exclusions. A positive identification with the identity 'old' is denied, the markers of age, masculinity or androgyny are erased, and a compulsory 'feminisation' towards a heteronormativity are some of the characteristics this type of representation implies.

M presents an alternative to either these two types of representing the older woman in film. And while not represented as a lesbian, there are some elements that facilitate a lesbian reading. In addition to the subversive qualities of Judi Dench's screen persona, her character M will appeal to a lesbian spectator on account of her performance of masculinity, her

dismissal of Bond (and his boyish charms), and her (feminist) complicity with Moneypenny.

The practice of reading against the grain of a predominant interpretation requires an actively engaged audience. In this chapter I challenged queer reading practices which usually focus on younger actresses (and characters) that imply a youth-centred viewer position. I here recall Woodward's argument about an ageist construction of the viewer position:

> we cast ourselves as younger in relation to the old person we see on the screen [...] unless, importantly, we are invited otherwise by the non-normative nature of the cultural text, or if we have educated ourselves to see past conventional and reductive ageist responses.
>
> (2006, p164)

Queer reading practices directed at characters who are represented as asexual – in accordance with an ageist stereotype of decline (of sexual desire and desirability) – can be seen as a useful exercise to counter not only the predominant heteronormativity in narratives containing ageing femininities but also an inherent ageism (as strong in LGBT representation as elsewhere). Thus, even when faced with a mainstream cultural text, a non-normative viewing position can achieve Woodward's non-ageist gaze.

This strategy further challenges lesbian reading strategies based on a character's physical strength and muscular (i.e. youthful) bodies. The reading I propose of the character M should be seen as *one* possibility of extending these lesbian readings to older characters. I recognise that these oppositional readings have a limited impact and do not alter modes of lesbian representability. There is, nonetheless the pleasure of subverting the meanings of mainstream texts that becomes possible with this type of engagement. This strategy allows viewers to challenge the prevalent

situation in mainstream films (which is characterised by an absence of older lesbians) by reading/producing a range of images that can provide points of identification in terms of transgressive images of gender, age or sexuality. The hypervisibility paradox is thus challenged by the viewer herself, through appropriating/ negotiating other available images of experiences of ageing that go beyond categories of sexual identity. Younger lesbian women can look beyond the images of lesbian 'chic' and benefit from more diverse kinds of older lesbian women by 'reading against the grain' of the youthful, heteronormative postfeminist culture.

Conclusion

The hypervisibility of young lesbians in contemporary cinema contrasts with the available modes of older lesbian representability as established throughout this thesis. In Chapter Four I explored this hypervisibility paradox through an analysis of contemporary configurations of the lesbian as ghosted (Castle, 1993). I have argued that the intersection of this mode of representing lesbians and lesbian desire (first identified by Castle in literary texts from the 18th and 19th centuries) with narratives of ageing as decline (in the form of terminal illness storylines) intensifies the older lesbian's ghostliness/otherness. In Chapter Five I focused on the concept of the monstrous 'other' as another mode of representability in stark contradiction with the contemporary hypervisible images of lesbian 'chic.' I argued that in *Notes on a Scandal* different levels of abjection combine – ageing abject, the lesbian abject – in the figure of the older lesbian as monstrous. Finally, I considered Barbara Covett as a queer character in order to present an

alternative to the identity politics approach and argued that Barbara's queer transgression can be read as subversive of the patriarchal order constructed.

The theme of transgression and that of alternative readings was carried through to the present chapter in which I focused on Judi Dench's star image in order to consider the possibilities of 'lesbianising' her film characters. In this context, the hypervisibility paradox becomes even clearer in that it becomes necessary to return to previous practices of 'reading against the grain,' supposedly superfluous in this era of new lesbian visibility, in order to multiply images that allow a lesbian reading and readings of older women in particular.

In this final chapter, I explored the ageist and sexist constructs that underlie Judi Dench's star image, in particular the public discourse generated around her status as a 'national treasure'. I explained that Judi Dench's star image is associated to the notions of tradition, family, motherhood, tainted with normative notions of gender and age.

In contrast to the 'saintly' image conferred on her by the general public, I analysed Dench's film roles in terms of their transgressive elements. A closer look at her cinematic roles reveals a common trait of transgression linking her female characters. I utilised a thorough line of transgressive female characters as the background to my reading of M (in the Bond films) as a lesbian and I explored this character's disruption of the patriarchal Bond-universe in terms of her feminist discourse. In particular, I highlight, the complicity established between Moneypenny and M and M's female masculinity. These elements are what sustain a possible lesbian reading.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that these transgressive roles can be seen as liberating for Dench, both as an actress and an older woman, by providing her with an opportunity to demonstrate her craft in unusual roles; and secondly, by allowing a distance from the 'dusty', 'matronly' public image she hates. Finally, these transgressive images of gender, age and sexuality confront dominant ideological structures and provide liberating alternatives for older women in the audience, who might embrace these as empowering; while, at the same time younger generations are familiarised with a wider range of images of age and femininity – which might change predominant sexist and ageist notions surrounding women on screen.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

In the introduction to this thesis I emphasised *The L Word*'s relevance as a landmark for lesbian mainstream visibility. In recent years more lesbian characters have become visible on our television and cinema screens, and more diverse stories have been explored in both independent productions and mainstream cinema. At first glance, this increased visibility of lesbian characters in the mainstream suggests that, at last, cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality have come to include a variety of possible lesbian identities. However, in this postfeminist cultural landscape, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual characters alike are indistinguishable in terms of their traditional femininity and sense of fashion. Their similarity is less an indication of more fluid conceptions of gender and sexuality than a universal erasure of differences which are incompatible with the parameters of postfeminist representations, which make (hetero)sexualisation of the body an imperative for cultural visibility. As a result, age and the ageing body are censored and become the cultural 'other'.

The ageing female body is thus only representable within certain paradigms that resolve cultural anxieties about ageing through an imposition of conventional forms of femininity and a traditional heteronormative setting. The problematically androgynous body of the older woman is therefore feminised in order to become acceptable (Wearing, 2007, pp297-298). The most visible images of the heterosexual older woman have recently conformed to these parameters, forming a subgenre identified as the 'older bird chick flick' (Tally, 2008). The hypervisibility of the sexualised, youthful looking, older female character constitutes an improvement on earlier representations of older women in film, limited to

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grandmother roles (Stoddard, 1983), while simultaneously creating another type of cultural image (the sexy oldie) with its own exclusions. One of these exclusions is apparent in the older lesbian woman.

The older lesbian is only one of the absences within this postfeminist cultural landscape, in which images that do not conform to a heteronormative youthfulness are rendered invisible or monstrous. An investigation into the meanings associated with the intersection of age and sexuality, the limitations and possibilities (for identification) with the existing images was my specific aim in this thesis. Faced with the paradox of the hypervisible younger lesbian and the invisibility of the older lesbian within contemporary mainstream representations, I concluded that visible older lesbian characters can be categorised according to two main concepts.

Drawing on literature from both ageing studies and lesbian film studies (in Chapters Two and Three), I argued that the intersection of age and lesbian sexuality resulted in lesbian images that had more in common with earlier, pre-gay liberation and pre-new visibility stereotypes than with the postfeminist cultural forms that now prevail.

In Chapter Four I explored the first concept, that of the apparitional, ghosted lesbian (Castle, 1993) by considering it in relation to representations of themes of illness, death and mourning. The older lesbian thus becomes visible as a supporting character in diverse and unrelated films in which I do, however, establish a *Leitmotif* that relates to earlier forms of representing the lesbian as well as to the narrative of ageing as decline. *Hold Back the Night*, *If These Walls Could Talk 2* and *The Shipping News* share themes of terminal illness, mourning and death that establish

the continuity of the paradigm of the ghosted, apparitional lesbian (Castle, 1993). I argued that the representational codes associated to old age confer a new meaning to the ghosted lesbian. The intersection of the identity *old* with the identity *lesbian* results in images that combine 'the logic of the disappearing female body' (Woodward, 2006, p163) with the ghosted lesbian.

In reading *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, I maintained that the unhappy ending/s in the '1961' segment combine the narrative of ageing as decline with a 'tradition' of tragic lesbian storylines (Russo, 1987). Abby's accident confirms the frailty of the ageing female body and reiterates Castle's principle, according to which '[o]ne woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one' (1993, p34). The intertext *The Children's Hour* at the beginning of '1961' provides more than a historical reference point; it suggests the inevitability of an unhappy-ending through reiteration – Martha's suicide in *The Children's Hour*, Abby's accident and Edith's 'disappearance' as her image dissolves in the last reel of that first narrative segment.

By portraying the tragic lesbian stories 'of the past' through the elderly lesbian couple in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, while the younger lesbians in segments '1972' and '2000' have a 'happy-ending,' the older lesbian becomes 'other.' This opposition between the past and the present, the old and the young is achieved through genre and narrative closure. The comedy-style, happy-ending final segment '2000' is aligned with 'the present' and thus closer to a contemporary viewer position. The narrative structure of social progress followed in *If These Walls Could Talk 2*

succeeds to the detriment of the older lesbian woman. By shifting the attention to a viewing position centred on the older characters as points of identification (as opposed to the younger ones), my analysis revealed the perpetuation of the cultural tendency of equating old age with death and mourning (certainly as far as older lesbian portrayals in mainstream cinema are concerned).

A similar differentiation is created between the young, heterosexual couple and the old lesbian woman in *Hold Back the Night*. A brief moment of intergenerational dialogue comes to an end with Vera's death. Vera becomes the ageing, terminally ill and dying 'other' who passes her wisdom 'on to the next generation' (Markson, 2003, p97) and allows 'a younger individual to develop more fully as an adult' (2003, p97).

I concluded that although these representations provide portrayals that lesbians and heterosexual viewers could identity with – seen that the experience of illness and loss of a loved one is universal – the persistence of this thematic imbeds lesbian stories within tragedy, maintaining the ghostly quality of the lesbian. What distinguishes *The Shipping News* from these other two films, is the fact that Agnis (Judi Dench) is not positioned as 'other' within the film. The experiences of loss and mourning are shared by all the characters, and opportunities for new beginnings are presented not only for the protagonist Quoyle, but also for Agnis. As opposed to the 'disappearing' lesbians in the other films, Agnis' story does not comply to a narrative of ageing as decline, neither is her character ghosted by being confined to a storyline of illness, death and mourning. Agnis is not confined

to an existence in the past, instead she inhabits the diegetic present and prospects of 'making a future'.

In Chapter Five, I explored another category through which the older lesbian becomes visible. As a protagonist in *Notes on a Scandal*, Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) combines the taboo of the ageing female body with the doubly transgressive same-sex desire for a younger woman. In this instance I argued that the lesbian character, long identified as predatory and monstrous in the history of cinematic representation (Creed, 1993; Weiss, 1992) is resuscitated through this stereotypical image in which several layers of abject and otherness intersect. The ageing body and the lesbian body as cultural constructs mutually enhance each other's abject otherness.

Drawing on Kristeva's concept of abjection (1982) and Douglas' idea of the danger of pollution (1966), I then identified moments in which abject domains are textually linked to Barbara, establishing her as the ageing other and her desire as abject/other. Despite Sheba's flaws (betraying her husband by having an affair with an underage student), within this film's ideological structure she is positioned as the norm – the normative youthful, heterosexual ideal. In this context, the old lesbian is constructed as abject on three levels – femininity (always already other), lesbianism and old age – and is consequently excluded from a matrix that is not only heterosexual, but youth-centred.

I argued that beyond a 'positive' images position, *Notes on a Scandal* could be approached from a queer position. As mentioned earlier, there has always been an affinity between cinematic monsters and gay identified viewers which, informed by queer theory, can be seen as transgressive and

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empowering. Drawing on Shildrick, I explored the encounter with the monstrous other as constructive, arguing that Sheba (and her 'ideal' family) is revealed as monstrous. The ageing, lesbian monster has the 'potential to confound normative identity' (Shildrick, 2002, p5), Sheba's normative identity. The revelation that the normative self is a construction, 'that requires constant maintenance' (Shildrick, 2002, p55) provides the opportunity for a queer shift towards a reader position that asserts 'difference with a proud defiance' (Stacey and Street, 2007, p5). From this position I formulated a reading of Barbara as a queer character.

While from an identity politics position Barbara's silence is seen as inadmissible – presenting the viewer with an image of 'closetedness' or repressed lesbianism – as a queer character, Barbara's silence becomes empowering. I have argued that her refusal to identify as lesbian can, thus, be seen to signify a queer resistance to fixed identity categories (and negatively constructed labels). Her refusal to 'confess' becomes a queer speech act of silence (Sedgwick, 1991). I then further explored this possibility for a queer reading by suggesting that Barbara's use of the label 'spinster' – in a transgressive appropriation of a negatively charged term – is an act of defiance. Barbara evokes an asexually constructed term while simultaneously subverting it – 'spinster' becomes a cover she uses to approach unsuspecting younger women who see her as the asexual older woman (who they can trust). Barbara's methods transgress (social, age or gender) appropriate behaviour and her relentless pursuit of companionship is admirable. As she approaches another younger woman in the last scene of the film, some viewers will probably believe *with her* that this might be

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'the one' while dismissing (as the character herself probably does) the more obvious conjecture that this is history repeating itself.

In Chapter Six, I proposed an oppositional reading of an older actress and her film roles in order to provide an alternative to these two possibilities. Through my research, I identified Judi Dench (who stars as a supporting character in *The Shipping News* and as co-protagonist in *Notes on a Scandal*) as a fundamental element in the present configuration of lesbian visibility. Drawing on theories of oppositional reading practice from feminist and lesbian spectatorship studies, I identified a *Leitmotif* of transgressive film characters which, associated to her lesbian, bisexual and queer roles, presents Judi Dench as a favourable candidate for these alternative readings.

Starting with a consideration of Judi Dench's diverse film roles, I identified a common trait of transgression throughout these roles. Indeed, as shown throughout this thesis, Dench's characters seem to present an alternative to normative notions of gender, age and sexuality. In defiance of sexist and ageist notions of age-appropriateness, Judi Dench shows a preference for challenging, unconventional roles. My reading of M – a recurring role for Dench since her debut as Bond's boss in the 1995 *GoldenEye* – links evidence of lesbian rumour and gossip circulating on the internet with a textual reading of her character as non-heteronormative. This case study aimed to outline possible strategies to locate alternative images able to provide an anchor for possible lesbian identifications. The thematic of transgression can provide routes into other mainstream film texts susceptible to readings 'against the grain.'

My main conclusion is that despite the formulaic storylines of the ghosted older lesbian and despite the return of the predatory monstrous lesbian, mainstream visibility still provides us with some viewing pleasures. From within formulaic storylines, refreshing alternatives arise. Seemingly 'negative' and stereotypical representations can be approached from a queer position and seen as subversive. Mainstream texts and its stars can be transgressively appropriated by way of an intertextual wealth of viewing knowledge. It is this knowledge that provides viewers with the tools to challenge the hypervisibility paradox by moving beyond the focus of youth as well as by considering a wider range of possibly 'lesbianisable' characters.

The interdisciplinary nature of this project can be seen to have ramifications that lead into possibilities for further work in various areas. As we have seen, images of older lesbian women are under-researched and much more work needs to be done. My investigation was aimed at mainstream cinematic representations, as no significant research focusing specifically on lesbian characters in film was located. An investigation into the representation of age within recent independent productions – such as *Hannah Free* (2009), which I briefly mentioned or Cheryl Dunye's 2010 *The Owls*[123] – could possibly consider the differences (or similarities) between indie and mainstream images of ageing. Similarly, a study of documentary film is certainly due, as Dittmar's investigation into lesbian ageing (1997) could now be updated with a consideration of recent documentaries, such as *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis at 100* (1999), *Lesbian Grandmothers from*

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[123] *The Owls* subtitle – Older Wiser Lesbians – announces the question of age.

Mars (2004) or *Out Late* (2008). There is also much wider research that could be carried out, for instance, in regards to specific lesbian audiences – in an investigation of international lesbian audiences or age groups. Audience study could further this area of research into a consideration of what pleasures there are in mainstream representations and what identifications are there to be made. It could interrogate what role models or villains are elected from available star images or fictional creations. My brief incursion into discourses formulated around Judi Dench indicates that online forums would present a fruitful ground for investigations into the construction of gender, ageing and sexuality in relation to a wider and diverse fan base.

My investigation set out to locate and analyse images of older lesbian women in mainstream film. Although I established a specific scope for my analysis, this project would always be shaped by the actual availability (or absence) of cinematic portrayals. My findings were consistent with existing research around the representation of lesbians in film, as established by recurring thematic and modes of representing lesbians and lesbian desire. By focusing on ageing I introduced a fresh perspective and contributed to the emerging field of culture-focused age studies.

Appendix 1: Brief Synopses

Boys on the Side (Ross, 1995)

Robin (Mary-Louise Parker) is looking for a ride-share. Jane (Whoopi Goldberg), a lesbian night club singer, answers her advertisement and they embark on a road trip to California. On their way they pick up Jane's friend Holly (Drew Barrymore), who is escaping a violent partner. They soon find out that Robin is HIV positive when she collapses due to an AIDS-related pneumonia. They decide to settle down in Arizona when Robin has to be hospitalised. As time goes on Jane falls in love with Robin, whose illness is worsening.

Casino Royale (2006)

This is the first film of the narrative 'reset' which introduces a Bond (Daniel Craig) recently promoted to '00' status. MI6 boss M (Judi Dench) assigns him to a high-stakes poker game in Montenegro to prevent Le Chiffre, banker to the world's terrorist organisations, from winning more funds at an attempt to destroy his organisation. M sends Vesper Lynd (Eva Green) along to handle the financial side and to 'keep an eye' on Bond. Vesper and Bond fall in love with each other. It turns out Vesper is being blackmailed.

The Children's Hour (1961)

Karen (Audrey Hepburn) and Martha (Shirley MacLaine) are best friends and share the posts of headmistress at their school for girls where they teach together. One of their pupils, Mary Tilford, is punished for lying and as revenge starts a rumour about her teachers' 'unnatural' feelings. Karen and Martha quickly loose all their pupils and face bankruptcy. This rumour,

however, brings Martha to realise that her feelings towards Karen go beyond friendship and in a confession to her friend she admits her 'unnatural feelings'. Unable to cope with this self-discovery Martha commits suicide.

Die Another Day (Tamahori, 2002)

James Bond is captured in a North Korean army base and subjected to torture before being released in an exchange of prisoners. Bond is relieved of all duties because he is blamed for leaking information leading to several agents' deaths while in custody. Determined to clear his name and to avenge himself, Bond chases Zao around the globe.

Fried Green Tomatoes (Avnet, 1991)

The framing narrative takes place at a nursing home, where Evelyn Crouch (Kathy Bates) befriends octogenarian Ninny (Mrs Cleo Threadgoode). Ninny tells her the story of Idgie and Ruth's friendship in 1920's Alabama. Idgie rescues Ruth from her abusive husband and, together, they run the Whistle Stop Cafe and bring up Ruth's son. Ruth becomes ill. On her deathbed she asks Idgie to take care of her son.

GoldenEye (Campbell, 1995)

James Bond (Pierce Brosnan) is assigned to recover 'GoldenEye' the access key to a top secret space weapon orbiting the Earth which fires a electromagnetic pulse able to neutralise all electronic equipment. M is now a woman (Judi Dench) whose methods are met with doubt by Bond and her other subordinates, creating moments of tension.

Hold Back the Night (1999)

Charleen (Christine Tremarco) is on the run from home. She meets eco-warrior Declan (Stuart Sinclair Blyth) in a pub and they end up spending the night together. Declan is part of a group of activists obstructing a

construction company in the process of demolishing forest area. After a violent confrontation with the police, the group scatters; Charleen and Declan manage to pass the inspection points along the road by hiding in a camper van. The two teenagers on the run join Vera (Sheila Hancock) a woman in her sixties on her way to Scotland. Charleen has a dark history – her mother committed suicide, incapable of handling the fact that her husband was raping their two daughters. Charleen feels helpless and guilty for having abandoned her sister in the hands of their abusive father. She is convinced that she is 'cursed' and at one point she attempts suicide but is saved in time. Vera, an ex-army lesbian, eventually 'comes out' to her travel companions. She also reveals that she is terminally ill and wishes to watch the sunset from the Ring of Brodgar, Orkney, in honour of her deceased partner, Jo. Vera reaches her destination and quietly passes away in Charleen's arms.

If These Walls Could Talk 2 (2000)

Following HBO's successful production of *If These Walls Could Talk* (Cher & Savoca, 1996) – which focused on the abortion issue through three stories set in different eras, the 1950s, 70s and 90s – *If These Walls Could Talk 2* sets out to explore the life of lesbian couples through three decades, the 1960, the 1970s and the 'present day', i.e. 2000. Once again, the 'walls' in the title refer to the house in which each story takes place. Each story focuses on a lesbian couple or group of lesbians, illustrating the social and political climate of each decade, moving from silence and lack of visibility (in the past) to acceptance and the attainment of civil rights for lesbians (in the present).

The first segment of this triptych,'1961' (Anderson), focuses on the relationship of two retired schoolteachers Edith Tree (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abby Hedley (Marian Seldes). They met at the school where they both taught. Photos and valentine cards imply a long-term relationship. After their evening at the cinema – the film is *The Children's Hour* – they return home. Abby wants to check the birds' house at the back of their garden before going to sleep but falls from the ladder. She suffers a stroke and later in

hospital passes away over night while Edith is waiting in the visitors' lounge. The main theme of this narrative is the aftermath of this event, as Abby's nephew, Ted, and his family come to claim their inheritance, including Abby and Edith's house (registered in Abby's name alone). Edith suffers the consecutive loss of her life partner and her home.

The second segment, '1972' (Coolidge), follows a group of lesbian-feminist university students who live in a house-share. The focus of this narrative is the intolerance and disagreements within the women's movement and the lesbian community itself. At a local butch-femme lesbian bar Linda (Michelle Williams) meets butch biker Amy (Chloe Sevigny). Linda's friends' inability to accept Amy, whose butch identity they consider reactionary, creates conflict. Linda and Amy do, however, surpass their differences and the narrative ends on a happy note.

The final segment '2000' (Heche) is the most light-hearted and fun of the narratives. Comedian Ellen DeGeneres and Sharon Stone star as modern day couple Kal and Fran (respectively) who decide to have children. The intricacies of artificial insemination are presented humorously. They find out Fran is pregnant in the last scene and as the end credits run, they start a goofy dance routine in their bathroom.

The Killing of Sister George (Aldrich, 1968)

June Buckridge (Beryl Reid) plays Sister George in a long-running BBC soap opera but her character is to be 'killed off'. She also finds out her younger partner Alice, 'Childie' (Susannah York), is seeing other people. George's boss, TV producer Mrs. Croft seduces Childie and convinces her to move in with her. George loses both her lover and her job and the part of a puppet cow in a new animation series that is offered to her is little consolation.

Love Actually (Curtis, 2003)

This romantic comedy, set almost entirely in London in the weeks before Christmas, follows a web-like pattern of loosely inter-related stories various

individuals and their love lives, or lack of them. Including the new bachelor prime minister and his new personal assistant Natalie; a writer and his non-English speaking Portuguese maid; a pair of movie stand-ins.

Notes on a Scandal (2006)

Barbara Covett (Judi Dench) teaches history at a comprehensive school in London. She is intrigued by new fellow art teacher Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett) who is younger, more attractive and more affluent. Sheba invites Barbara for family lunch and introduces her to her family. Barbara discovers that Sheba is having an affair with one of their students, Steven Connolly and is first shocked, then jealous. This knowledge gives her the power to manipulate Sheba into unconditional friendship. When Sheba chooses her family over Barbara (who had just lost her cat), Barbara reveals Sheba's secret to a fellow teacher and the gossip soon reaches the school's administration and the authorities. Sheba is arrested and Barbara accused of being her confidante. Not knowing Barbara was the one who leaked the information, Sheba moves temporarily into Barbara's flat while awaiting the court hearing. Rummaging around Barbara's things she discovers her diary, reads it and finds out Barbara's obsession with her, as well as her betrayal. A violent confrontation follows. In the end Sheba returns to her family and Barbara is seen approaching another younger woman.

Quantum of Solace (2008)

A direct sequel to *Casino Royale*. M has to deal with a secret organisation which has infiltrated MI6. Bond thwarts an attempt to assassinate M and follows a lead to Dominic Greene. M tries to restrict Bond's movements as he kills one too many contacts and is framed for killing an adviser to the prime minister. Bond meets Camille who is also looking for revenge.

The Shipping News (2001)

Quoyle (Kevin Spacey) is married to wild and unfaithful Petal (Cate Blanchett) who does not show much interest in either her husband or their

six-year-old daughter Bunny (Alyssa, Kaitlyn and Lauren Gainer). When Petal has a fatal car accident, the police inform Quoyle that she had sold their daughter for adoption on the black market but luckily is able to recover her safely. Suddenly a widower and a single father Quoyle is struggling. When his aunt Agnis Hamm (Judi Dench) stops by to visit them, Quoyle accepts her invitation to start a new life in Newfoundland, their family's ancestral home. Agnis soon finds her place on this austere and bleak island and decides to set up her naval upholstery business in order to fund renovation work on her old house. Agnis is presented as an independent and reserved woman; as the narrative proceeds several of her secrets are revealed. Her brother (Quoyle's father) raped her when she was a teenager, she terminated the pregnancy. Agnis also reveals she lost her long term partner, Irene, to leukaemia. Just as Quoyle, Agnis needs a new start and soon a new relationship begins to flourish. Agnis moves in with colleague Mavis (Nancy Beatty) and, in a fleeting shot, we can see them lying in bed reading and knitting.

Things You Can Tell Just by Looking at Her (2000, García)

Five loosely connected stories centre on very different women each dealing with their problems. A doctor looking after her invalid mother; a successful bank manager dealing with an unplanned pregnancy; a single mother who finds herself attracted to a new neighbour; two sisters who are both trying to find companionship in different ways. The story 'Good night Lilly, good night Christine' centres on Christine (Calista Flockhart) and her terminally-ill partner Lilly (Valeria Golino). Christine is first introduced as a tarot card reader in one of the preceding stories. She is struggling with depression and grief while taking care of her lover Lilly who is dying from what appears to be cancer. Lilly reminisces about the day they met at a friend's party. Flashbacks of a happier time intersect with the image of their darkened room, where Lilly lies in pain. In a last scene, Christine is feeding some canaries but Lilly is absent.

***Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997)**

Media tycoon Elliot Carver is trying to start a World War III by convincing the British that the Chinese are making hostile advances (and vice-versa). M orders Bond to use his previous relationship with Carver's wife to infiltrate the news organisation. M has a disagreement with an admiral over her procedures and Bond gets some unexpected help from Chinese secret agent Wai Lin.

Screenography

About Schmidt (2002) Directed by Alexander Payne, USA: New Line Cinema.

A Fine Romance (1980-1983) UK: ITV.

Alien (1979) Directed by Ridley Scott, USA, UK: Twentieth Century-Fox.

All Over Me (1997) Directed by Alex Sichel, USA: Peccadillo Pictures.

Ally McBeal (1997-2002) USA: 20th Century Fox Television.

Anders Leben – Lesben im Alter (2005) Directed by Isabel Rodde, Germany: medien konkret.

April's Shower (2003) Directed by Trish Doolan, USA: Silverleaf Productions.

As Time Goes By (1992-2005) UK: BBC.

Bangers Sisters, *The* (2002) Directed by Bob Dolman, USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Basic Instinct (1992) Directed by Paul Verhoeven, USA: Momentum Pictures.

Before Stonewall (1984) Directed by John Scagliotti & Greta Schiller, USA: Before Stonewall Inc.

Between Two Women (2000) Directed by Steven Woodcock, UK: North Country Pictures.

Bound (1996) Directed by Andy Wachowski & Larry Wachowski, USA: Dino De Laurentiis.

Boys on the Side (1995) Directed by Herbert Ross, USA/France: Warner Bros. Pictures.

But I'm a Cheerleader (1999) Directed by Jamie Babbit, USA: Cheerleader LLC.

Calendar Girls (2003) Directed by Nigel Cole, UK, USA: Touchstone Pictures.

Casino Royale (2006) Directed by Martin Campbell, UK/USA: Eon Productions.

Chasing Amy (1997) Directed by Kevin Smith, USA: Too Askew Prod. Inc.

Children's Hour, *The* (1961) Directed by William Wyler, USA: The Mirisch Corporation.

Chocolat (2000) Directed by Lasse Hallström, UK/USA: Miramax.

Chronicles of Riddick, *The* (2004) Directed by David Twohy, USA: Universal Pictures.

Claire of the Moon (1992) Directed by Nicole Conn, USA: Peccadillo Pictures.

Cloud Nine (2008) Directed by Andreas Dresen, Germany: Peter Rommel Productions.

Color Purple, The (1985) Directed by Steven Spielberg, USA: Warner Bros.

Collateral (2004) Directed by Michael Mann, USA: Paramount Pictures.

Common Ground (2000) Directed by Donna Deitch, USA: Showtime.

Cougar Town (2009-) USA: ABC Studios.

Cranford (2007, 2009) UK: BBC.

Desert Hearts (1985) Directed by Donna Deitch, USA: Samuel Goldwyn Company.

Desperate Housewives (2004-) USA: ABC Studios.

Die Another Day (2002) Directed by Lee Tamahori, UK/USA: Eon Productions.

Do I Love You? (2002) Directed by Lisa Gornick, UK: Valiant Doll.

Ellen (1994-1998) USA: Touchstone.

Everything Relative (1996) Directed by Sharon Pollack, USA: Lillivres Multimedia.

ER (1994-2009) USA: NBC.

Finn's Girl (2007) Directed Dominique Cardona & Laurie Colbert, Canada: Cardona-Colbert
      Production.

Fried Green Tomatoes (1991) Directed by John Avnet, USA: Granada International Media.

Gentlemen Prefer Blondes (1953) Directed by Howard Hawks, USA: Twentieth Century-Fox.

Go Fish (1994) Directed by Rose Troche, USA: Can I Watch.

GoldenEye (1995) Directed by Martin Campbell. UK/USA: MGM.

Gray Matters (Kramer, 2006) Directed by Sue Kramer, USA: Archer Entertainment.

Gymnast, *The* (2006) Directed by Ned Farr USA: Fearless Angel Productions.

Gypo (2005) Directed by Jan Dunn, UK: Swipe Films.

Hannah Free (2009) Directed by Wendy Jo Carlton, USA: Ripe Fruit Films.

Harold and Maude (1971) Directed by Hal Ashby, USA: Paramount Pictures.

Hold Back the Night (1999), Directed by Philip Davis, UK: The Film Consortium.

Hours, The (2002) Directed by Stephen Daldry, USA, UK: Miramax International.

Hunger, The (1983) Directed by Tony Scott, UK: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

If These Walls Could Talk (1996) Directed by Cher & Nancy Savoca, USA: HBO

If These Walls Could Talk 2 (2000) Directed by Jane Anderson, Martha Coolidge & Anne Heche, USA: HBO.

Imagine Me & You (2005) Directed by Ol Parker, USA, UK & Germany: BBC Films & Ealing Studios.

Importance of Being Earnest, The (2002) Directed by Oliver Parker. UK/USA: Miramax

Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love, The (1995) Directed by Maria Maggenti, USA: Fine Line Features.

Iris (2001) Directed by Richard Eyre, UK: Miramax Films.

Itty Bitty Titty Committee (2007) Directed by Jamie Babbit, USA: Power Up.

It's Complicated (2009) Directed by Nancy Meyers, USA: Universal Pictures.

Julie Johnson (2001) Directed by Bob Gosse, USA: Shooting Gallery.

Kids are All Right, The (2010) Directed by Lisa Cholodenko, USA: Focus Features.

Killing of Sister George, The (1968) Directed by Robert Aldrich, USA: Palomar Pictures International.

Kissing Jessica Stein (2001) Directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Ladies in Lavender (2004) Directed by Charles Dance, UK: UK Film Council.

Late Bloomers (1995) Directed by Julia Dyer, USA: Millivres Multimedia.

Lesbian Grandmothers from Mars (2004) Directed by Keith Wilson, USA: Walleye Productions.

Lianna (1983) Directed by John Sayles, USA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

License to Kill (1989) Directed by John Glen, UK, USA: United Artists.

Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis at 100 (1999) Directed by Yvonne Welbon, USA: Wolfe Video.

Losing Chase (1996) Directed by Kevin Bacon, USA: Hallmark Entertainment.

Lost and Delirious (2001) Directed by Léa Pool, Canada: Cité-Amérique.

Love Actually (2003) Directed by Richard Curtis, UK: Universal Pictures.

Loving Annabelle (2006) Directed by Katherine Brooks, USA: Divine Light Pictures.

L Word, *The* (2004-2009) USA: Showtime.

Mädchen in Uniform (1931) Directed by Leontine Sagan, Germany: Deutsche Film-Gemeinschaft.

Mamma Mia! (2008) Directed by Phyllida Lloyd, UK, USA & Germany: Universal Pictures.

Miami Vice (2006) Directed by Michael Mann, USA: Universal Pictures.

Mona Lisa Smile (2003) Directed by Mike Newell, USA: Revolution Studios.

Mother, The (2003), Directed by Roger Michell, UK: BBC Films & Momentum Pictures.

Mrs Brown (1997) Directed by John Madden. UK/Ireland/USA: Buena Vista.

Mrs Henderson Presents (2005) Directed by Stephen Frears. UK/USA: Pathe.

Mrs. Palfrey at the Claremont (2005) Directed by Dan Ireland, UK, USA: Picture Entertainment Corporation.

My Summer of Love (2004) Directed by Pawel Pawlikowski, UK: Apocalypso Pictures & BBC Films.

Night of the Iguana, The (1964) Directed by John Huston, USA: MGM.

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