

**'Grey is the new green?': Gauging age(ing) in Hollywood's upper quadrant female audience,
The Intern (2015), and the discursive construction of 'Nancy Meyers'**

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ABSTRACT

Nancy Meyers's 2015 film, *The Intern*, was met by an often lukewarm reception but made close to \$200m worldwide. The story of a successful young fashion start-up entrepreneur Jules (Anne Hathaway), who hires a 'senior' (citizen) intern Ben (Robert de Niro) to become her assistant, Meyers struggled to get the film greenlit despite her films having collectively grossed well over \$1billion, and despite films with intergenerational appeal being said to constitute 'the industry's holy grail' (Cox, 2012). This essay examines how in the media reception of this and other of Meyers's films, her presumed appeal to *older women fans* in particular is consistently positioned dismissively by critics, a discourse in which she is pigeonholed as a 'mom-com director' (McDermott, 2015). Such disdain is tied to the fact that Meyers is herself an older woman director, an unlikely conjunction made to augment this regularly disparaging critical environment, in which Meyers is discursively constructed through an ageist/sexist lens that has debarred her from 'the exclusive realm of celebrity directors' (Sims, 2014: 191). Through interrogating the cultural positioning of 'Nancy Meyers', her work and her older women fans *together*, one uncovers how these sites are interwoven junctures in a shared matrix. Thus the essay's multi-perspectival method brings to light both the breathtaking spectrum of intertwined ways in which older and ageing women are sidelined and undermined across culture, and how the agendas of celebrity studies, audience studies and cultural gerontology might productively intersect.

KEY WORDS -

Nancy Meyers – intergenerationality – older women audiences – *The Intern* – ageing celebrity – women directors

BIOG -

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Released in 2015 with the tagline ‘Experience never gets old’, Nancy Meyers’s *The Intern* was met by an often lukewarm reception. For critics such as Kate Taylor in *The Globe and Mail* it was ‘the kind of comedy you can rent some Saturday night, secure in the knowledge that if you fall asleep in the third act, a more alert friend can summarize its conclusions in a matter of seconds’ (Taylor, 2015). This critical tone, suggesting the film had a kind of tolerable if predictable banality, was widespread among reviewers (although for some the film was rather more unbearable, constituting a ‘too-sucrose Ephron-lite cringe-fest’ in Peter Bradshaw’s one-star *Guardian* review, for example (2015)). Still, on a relatively modest budget of \$35m *The Intern* went on to generate close to \$200m worldwide (boxofficemojo.com), an enviable profit in keeping with Meyers’s consistently impressive box-office performance and longstanding status as the most commercially successful woman filmmaker of all time. The story of accomplished but overburdened young fashion start-up entrepreneur, Jules (Anne Hathaway), who hires a ‘senior’ (citizen) intern Ben (Robert De Niro) and ends up with a mentor and unanticipated ‘best friend’ in the process, its director has spoken frankly about the difficulty she had getting the film greenlit (BAFTA, 2015), despite her films having collectively grossed well over \$1billion (see, for example, Greenblatt, 2015). Films with the promise of ‘inter-generational’ appeal have long been a coveted commodity in the industry for the much sought-after breadth of their box-office potential. Indeed, David Cox has positioned them as the business’s preeminent aspiration, observing, ‘The most cost-effective films are those that appeal to all age-groups... the industry’s holy grail has become the “inter-generational movie”’ (2012). But alongside this, numerous scholarly and journalistic accounts of late have begun to ponder the burgeoning presence and significance of the *mature* cinema audience – that is, the ‘graying’ consumer described by Barnes and Cieply as those aged 50+ (2011) (see also Mandelbaum, 2013; Jermyn, 2014) - and the growth of movies more evidently likely to appeal to them, than to the 16-25 market. A number of Meyers’s films, most notably also *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003) and *It’s Complicated* (2009), have been key to this cautious movement, as successful romantic comedies that placed older narratives at their centreⁱ, and in particular dared to make older women (played by Diane Keaton and Meryl Streep respectively) protagonists. Despite this landscape, however, and despite the combined box-office pedigree of Hathaway, De Niro and Meyers herself, *The Intern* nevertheless struggled to gain financing even while being explicitly *about* an intergenerational friendship.

In this essay I interrogate how the imagined older women fans of Meyers’s more recent films are positioned by critics in frequently belittling terms and the repercussions of this discourse, giving some discomfiting insights into the difficulties met by the film both in terms of its initially being

greenlit and in its subsequent reception. Furthermore, I examine how the perception of Meyers as a director who makes films for/about older people – and most particularly again, older *women* – has become integral to her work being positioned dismissively and contemptibly by critics, and to her having been excluded from the kind of fame and ‘star power’ enjoyed by her professional peers (Sims, 2014: 202). For Barnes and Cieply as noted, the ‘graying audience’ (2011) refers to those aged 50+ - an audience group that increased by a striking 67% in the US between 1995 and 2011, even if its numbers remain modest compared to the under-50s (ibid).ⁱⁱ As one of the employees at ‘About The Fit’ remarks in *The Intern*, then, when the new senior interns arrive for their first day at Jules’s still predominantly youth-focused offices, perhaps ‘Grey is the new green’? Or perhaps the ramifications of these changing audience demographics constitute a shift that the industry is even now struggling to fully absorb: as Rob Schaap delineated in 2011, the predominant Hollywood business model still constructs its audience on a simple ‘four-quadrant’ template consisting of men under 25; women under 25; men over 25; women over 25 (Schaap, 2011). Clearly, then, the ‘upper quadrant’ encompasses an unwieldy, hugely diverse breadth of age difference that seems set to make progressively less sense given the demographic developments of the contemporary era. Importantly, we find ourselves at this time in a historical moment marked by an ageing global population. The United Nation’s 2015 report on World Population Ageing found that, ‘In 2015, one in eight people worldwide was aged 60 years or over... By 2030, older persons are projected to account for one in six people globally’ (United Nations, 2015: 3). In terms of production, the film industry appears to have been cautiously responding to this, seemingly becoming gradually (if still sporadically) more receptive to narratives centering on older characters and to addressing ageing audiences. This is evidenced not just by Meyers’s movies above, but by the greenlighting (and sometimes unexpectedly buoyant box-office performance) of numerous other films coming in the wake of *Something’s Gotta Give*, such as *Mamma Mia!* (2008), the *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012) and its 2015 sequel, *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, or on a more modest stage the smaller-scale body of work amassed by director Joel Hopkins (*Last Chance Harvey* (2008); *The Love Punch* (2013) and *Hampstead* (2017)). Yet as Meyers’s experiences with *The Intern* suggest, Hollywood is also at the same time still overwhelmingly beguiled by the prospect of youth-focused/led, big-budget, often action-heavy franchises which promise even bigger commensurate returns and merchandising opportunities among young fans. Next to these kinds of films Meyers’s mid-budget character-driven films ‘about people’ (BAFTA, 2015) pose something of a conundrum to the studios, despite their reliable capacity to turn a profit. As I have written elsewhere, such quietly observed filmmaking, like the older woman as a subject *per se*, has struggled to be considered worthy of sustained academic or critical attention, being too easily and unthinkingly dismissed as

inconsequential in a culture that still readily reveres male canons and 'masculine' narratives (Jermyn, 2017), such that undertaking the mode of research at stake here feels to be both academically perilous on the one hand, and a feminist and scholarly imperative on the other.

Consequently, this essay insists we examine the significance of how in the reception of her work Meyers is frequently disparaged in a gendered and ageist fashion, and her accomplishments sidelined, by a peculiarly inflected critical scorn which is obliquely meted out particularly to what are presumed to be *older female fans*. Rather than sidestep the cultural - and academic - tendency to brush older women, their experiences and representation to one side, writing from a feminist perspective I scrutinise here how widely imbricated in critics' derision, their disdain is tied to the fact that Meyers (born 1949) is herself an *older woman* director. She is often referred to patronisingly in reviews in faux-obsequious fashion as 'the romcom queen', drawing oblique attention to both her (older) age and gender (see Jermyn, 2017: 68-9) while tying her reputation to that most scorned of genres in today's marketplace. Furthermore, she has demonstrably not reached the level of 'celebrity' recognition enjoyed by her professional (overwhelmingly male) peers despite record-breaking professional achievementsⁱⁱⁱ. The work thus draws on newspaper and film website reviews of Meyers's films since *Something's Gotta Give's* release in 2003, amassed from North American and UK sources. Methodologically, it borrows from what Janet Staiger has eloquently described as 'historical reception studies', namely an approach which in part 'attempts to illuminate the cultural meanings of texts in specific times and social circumstances to specific viewers', in which 'receptions need to be related to specific historical conditions as events' (Staiger, 2000: 162). In a multiply-inflected approach, I combine this with textual analysis most particularly of the theme of ageing in *The Intern*, locating the film as the latest installment in an oeuvre that has consistently reflected on the progressive experiences of the shifting life stages, and, briefly, comparative analysis of Meyers's relative non-'celebrity-director' status next to other contemporary women filmmakers in Hollywood. I find that through the later part of her career, it is frequently impossible to extricate the woman behind the camera - the 50 years+/60 years+, petite, carefully groomed, inconspicuously and impeccably turned-out Meyers - from the regularly derisive reception of her films, so uncomfortably does this figure sit with prevailing expectations about who gets to be understood as an 'artist' and/or who gets to command respect and power in Hollywood, even while her race and class are platforms for privilege^{iv}. Thus even when she makes a box-office success like *The Intern*, which was evidently conceived from the off as containing strong potential four-quadrant appeal and which even won some critical recognition for not defaulting to a standard narrative of 'ageing as decline' (Whelehan, 2013: 83), it was inevitably pre-ordained for many that the film could be received only as

‘a fluffy workplace fantasy from queen of the genre, Nancy Meyers’ (Robey, 2015). The implications of all this go far beyond the purview of an individual case study, however. Rather, through interrogating the cultural positioning of ‘Nancy Meyers’, her work and her older women fans *together*, one uncovers how these are interwoven junctures in a shared matrix, one in which the agendas of celebrity studies, audience studies and cultural gerontology might productively intersect. This approach shines a light on both the ubiquity and artfulness of the sexist and ageist dogmas at work in an industry which, like Harrington et al’s conceptualisation of television, plays a pivotal part in ‘the contemporary aging experience because of the important role it plays in cultural typecasting’ (2014: 9); furthermore, in doing so the work seeks to redress a critical landscape in which ‘scholarly inattention undermines a deeper understanding of how these industries construct age, aging and the life course as cultural products’ (ibid).

‘Your Mom’s Favourite Director’: Meyers and the middle-aged woman fan

In 2013, when there was some speculation in the industry press about what Meyers’s next project would be, the Film School Rejects website announced (erroneously, as it turned out) that her next film would be taking her overseas, in an article entitled ‘Your Mom’s Favorite Director, Nancy Meyers, Is Heading Back to the UK’ (Erbland, 2013). Elsewhere, *Chicago Sun-Times* reviewer Richard Roeper’s video-review of *The Intern* adopted exactly the same pitch when *The Intern* eventually came out, opening by declaring ‘*The Intern* is what I call a mom movie’ (though he quickly states defensively also that he doesn’t mean that as ‘an insult’) (2015). Unusually, Erbland’s piece was accompanied by a picture of Meyers at work, in the kind of image one rarely sees of her in the intermittent reviews and articles engaging with her, capturing her on set, peering ahead in concentration while standing next to a camera, at one level at least giving recognition to the actual labour she engages in as the holder of the occupational title, ‘director’. Yet the inference of the article’s title, bolstered by the picture of the middle-aged bespectacled woman beneath it, was clear; the inherently belittling designation ‘Your Mom’s Favorite Director’ (like ‘mom movie’) speaks to the presumed delimited appeal of Meyers’s work to other ‘women of a certain age’ (ie like her), being both a gendered and aged marque. In fact, the article seems almost to imply by association, to its cool, in-the-know readership, perhaps ‘your mom’ (or other white, upper middle-class, middle-aged moms the reader may know) might even look a little bit like the woman in this picture, or would like to, with her petite physique, modest jewelry and carefully coiffed shoulder-length hair, dressed in a simply cut, short-sleeved black v-neck blouse, all of which are tastefully understated. The imagined fan, and the director herself, are in some sense made interchangeable here.

I will return below to the question of how Meyers typically looks in the publicity shots and in the other limited repertoire of images of her that are available, and how as an ageing woman director her low-key styling is arguably enmeshed in her non-celebrity status, compounding the lack of recognition she commands next to both male and female peers as a director of mainstream 'chick flicks'. But I want first to pursue further the question of the imagined older female fans positioned as constituting Meyers's base audience, and how this feeds the low critical esteem Meyers holds as a director, once described by Peter Bradshaw (in highly gendered terms) as 'the world's foremost purveyor of crack-cocaine-strength gastro-lifestyle fantasy porn to the menopausal classes' (2010). Though many critics might regularly presume that it is older women who are buying tickets for her films^v, the fact is there is no consolidated research available on Meyers's audiences with which to confirm or repudiate these presumptions. Meyers has herself indicated that she writes with an audience of women and men in mind (BAFTA, 2015) and does not believe her films to be 'chick flicks' with only the demarcated gendered appeal this implies, counselling interviewers, 'Don't think only women go to my movies' (Shapiro, 2015; see also Larocca, 2015). Furthermore, a striking micro-level example of *Something's Gotta Give's* cross-generational appeal was highlighted by Meyers herself on Instagram shortly before the release of *The Intern*, when in April 2015 she 'regrammed' a photo of a bachelorette party she'd been sent. The picture showed an excited group of young women who had hired a house in the Hamptons for their celebrations, and collectively dressed up in white turtlenecks and Diane Keaton/Erica Barry-styled oversized specs to mark the occasion with a *Something's Gotta Give*-themed dinner party there.^{vi} The scene shared in this image is an arresting one, capturing a group of 20-something women demonstrating the kinds of 'knowing' collective pleasure and fan behaviour readily allied with cult film audiences, and thus rarely affiliated with 'chick flicks' which circulate quite outside the 'cool' or 'insider' domain of cult. Unsettling presumptions about her dominant fanbase, the kind of cos-play style event seen fleetingly here is not the sort of activity readily allied with the docile image of the chick flick fan, and neither too has these women's youthfulness discounted them from apparently identifying as 'Nancy Meyers fans'. Elsewhere, a keen young female fanbase is suggested again by the appearance of the 'Oh You Nancy, Huh?' podcast available on iTunes and delivered by two further 20-something women devotees of Meyers, in which 'Sweater wearing, kitchen idolizing, wine drinking hosts Kelly Hill and Meaghan Devine love Nancy Meyers. Like really love her. This is a Nancy Meyers breakdown podcast where we will watch, analyze and discuss all things Nancy Meyers (related and non-related.)' (iTunes, 2017).

Clearly, one must not read too much representativeness into what amount to isolated if striking examples of a younger fan-following for Meyers. But in keeping with their suggestiveness of a cross-generational address, some scholarly commentators have contended, as Meyers herself does, that Meyers's appeal very much extends significantly beyond an older female audience (see Marshall, 2009; Wiggers, 2010). At the same time, however, other theorists situate the appeal of Meyers's mature romances as squarely targeting 'the specific niche audience of middle-aged women' (Kaklamanidou, 2013: 89). And in the absence of any actual substantiated research, a popular impression built on presumption and stereotyping has grown over the years in often negative reviews, in which a repeated and notable theme in critics' dismissiveness or disinterest in the '*mom-com director Nancy Meyers*' (McDermott, 2015, my emphasis) has been a certain disdain for the predominantly female – and, crucially, often older female – fans they believe Meyers's film were actually intended for. In their earlier research into the reception of *Something's Gotta Give* using reviews accumulated on rottenromatoes.com, for example, Scodari and Mulvaney found that 'pinpointing older women as the film's target audience was a common tack', which recurrently featured alongside a 'tendency to report that the film serves as a fantasy exercise for its target audience' (2005). In this way, a gendered vision of Meyers's older female fanbase or the older female audience generally as somehow more needy or delusional than younger and/or male fellow cinema-goers is popularised, for as the authors note, 'Surely, scores of action films featuring aging male heroes act as fantasy fulfilment for older men, but reviewers seldom declare this at all, much less as a liability' (Scodari and Mulvaney, 2005: 35).

Six years after *Something's Gotta Give* and writing on *It's Complicated*, 'I'm under thirty, I'm not married and I'm not a woman', opens Julian Sancton's Q&A with Meyers rather defensively in *Vanity Fair* – hence, he is apparently compelled to distance himself from the imagined audience and confess that the task of interviewing the director made him feel like 'an interloper' (2009). Meanwhile, for Todd McCarthy in *Variety*, the film was 'a cloying self-satisfied... glossy confection that will find its most responsive audience among women of a certain age on girls' nights out' (2009). Somewhat less benignly, for David Edelstein writing in *New York* magazine, *It's Complicated* is 'an older woman's emasculating revenge fantasy' (2009); and for Scott Foundas, *Something's Gotta Give* 'panders to the very audience (namely, middle aged women) that it ostensibly empowers' (2003). This older woman fan can be found again implicitly too in Michael Atkinson's review of *Something's Gotta Give*, where he adopts the same vernacular as Foundas to describe the film's '*pandering tripe*' (my emphasis) as a 'menopausal screwball' (2003); and she's more than in evidence too in Roger Ebert's sketch of *It's Complicated*'s 'target demographic', as including 'gal pals taking a movie break after

returning Christmas presents' (2009). In these and other reviews the dismissive vision evoked of older women fans, often travelling in packs it would seem, provides a ready opportunity to parade tired clichés about ageing women, as ninnies to be 'pandered to', indiscriminating in their tastes, and less culturally cognizant than their male counterparts (and the male critics so often writing about them of course). Elsewhere, Dana Stevens, writing about *It's Complicated* and reflecting on the critical reception often meeting Meyers, importantly defends her against ageist and misogynistic derision, saying 'I reject the logic by which middle-aged female wish fulfilment at the movies deserves only our scorn while adolescent-boy wish fulfilment is worthy of adulation' (Stevens, 2009); but in the process nevertheless infers again that these films do speak primarily to *older women*.

This positioning of Meyers's predominant fan base as 'women of a certain age' and 'middle-aged females' is problematic for Meyers, operating as she does, and as the reviews above underline, both within a society where ageing women hold diminishing cultural cachet the older they get, and within an industry where older women audiences are seen as the least imperative audience to target. Indeed, this may in no small part account for the difficulty she had in getting *The Intern* greenlit. The fact that years earlier the pitch for *Something's Gotta Give* was successfully made 'over lunch to Sony Chief Amy Pascal [who] said yes immediately' (Rochlin, 2003) seems important in this respect; Pascal is described by Kim Masters as being 'known for partiality to so-called chick-flicks' (2003), a description that could be applied to few senior personnel and studio bosses in Hollywood. But even Pascal has blankly declared that, 'Women don't open pictures, older, younger, in-between. No, they don't' (Masters, 2003). Underlining this, in 2003 Salon reported with palpable surprise that on its opening weekend *Something's Gotta Give* had, against all expectation it would seem, managed to outperform the Tom Cruise historical epic *The Last Samurai* (2003) released a week earlier (Traister, 2003). Producer Linda Obst notes the thorny status of older women audiences for Hollywood in the same piece, observing that the industry considers adult women to be 'the hardest audience to convert from interest to ticket buyer, so therefore the hardest to make movies for' (Traister, 2003; see also Lippman, 2003). And in the same vein, Rob Schaap's study of the gendering of cinema in conglomerate Hollywood concludes that, importantly, 'females go to see films that address them as male and older audiences go to see films that address them as youngsters, but in neither case does the reverse significantly apply. Clearly, *the quadrant most disadvantaged by the cruel logic of demography is the mature female, those over 25...*' (2011: 157) (my emphasis). Meyers's older women fans, then, seem to be both at the forefront of the disdain for Meyers, and at the bottom of the industry's priorities.

'Not a household name': Nancy Meyers's Ageing Non-Celebrity

The close imbrication of Meyers with ageing women fans can also be seen as integral to her anomalous and inequitable lack of popular recognition, despite the length of her career and the body of work it has encompassed. She made her industry debut as an Oscar-nominated co-writer (and producer) on the much heralded *Private Benjamin* in 1980, following this up with a series of successful co-written and co-produced projects including *Baby Boom* (1987) and *Father of the Bride* (1991), and since 1998 has directed six films in a career now entering its fourth decade. Daphne Merkin's lengthy 2009 *New York Times* profile of her rightly opened in impressed and impressive style, then, by observing that '[she] may be a singular figure in Hollywood — may, in fact, be the most powerful female writer-director-producer currently working' (2009). Having made this arresting pronouncement, however, Merkin then goes on to remark that nevertheless, this 'doesn't appear to give the 60-year-old blonde a whole lot of social clout', explaining how in the course of the interview they were asked to vacate their table at a popular Brentwood restaurant to make way for another guest (Merkin, 2009). Elsewhere in the still limited scholarship on Meyers, the opening to Deborah M. Sims's 2014 essay on Meyers and *Something's Gotta Give* echoes Merkin in palpable ways, noting the incongruity of the fact that 'Nancy Meyers is the most financially successful female director of all time, but she is not a celebrity. Her films sell more tickets than those of Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino, yet Nancy Meyers is not a household name' (2014: 191). For Sims, Meyers's exclusion from the 'the exclusive realm of celebrity directors' can be accounted for by two factors: 'She is a woman, and, worse still, she writes so-called chick flicks' (Sims, 2014: 191). This is a deduction that seems entirely persuasive, as Sims goes on to delineate how the standing of 'celebrity director' is bestowed according to entrance to 'an elite community of auteur filmmaking that is coded as masculine and upholds admission standards predicated on maleness' (2014: 193). But I want to attempt to unpack Sims's assertion further still here, however, by thinking too about how Meyers's 'failure' to court more media interest and gain greater visibility and recognition is also tied up in how, as an ageing woman subject, whose personal style and bearing are somewhat low-key, she also doesn't meet certain 'industry standards' in terms of culturally favoured signifiers of (ideally youthfully-inflected) femininity.

Performing such an analysis is a knotty methodological arena indeed, since it risks fueling, compounding or prolonging precisely the kinds of gendered scrutiny and conservative, constraining discourses of judgmental comparisons between women that it wishes to challenge. Nevertheless, it

will be instructive to enter this troubling terrain and be uncomfortably candid here momentarily, to posit whether one of the reasons Meyers generates less media interest and celebrity than more visible contemporary woman directors such as Kathryn Bigelow or Sofia Coppola, quite beyond the content of their work, is in part simply because of *how she looks* in contrast to them. Meyers could surely be said to be 'ageing successfully' by prevailing cultural standards, such as this highly problematic term allows for. But in the closely hierarchal and hypercritical evaluations which all women are subject to, she does not conform to the same desirable benchmarks that Bigelow or Coppola reach in different ways, qualities which arguably have helped enable them, unusually, to enter and graduate as women into the masculinised celebrity director's club Sims (2014) speaks of.

Tellingly, a 2009 online article from the business magazine *Forbes*, blankly entitled 'Think looks don't matter? Think again', examined the penalty levied on the salaries and career advancement of working women according to their appearance, in an all too familiar account of workplace sexism drawing on research conducted at Cornell University. Its findings pointed to how, 'Women who advance most at work, studies agree, are more attractive, thinner, taller and have a more youthful appearance than their female colleagues who are promoted less often... Being average-looking comes with a hefty price' (Sinberg, 2009). While within the film industry it is evidently women actors who most overtly have to negotiate such toxic professional pressures all the time, it would be naïve to imagine that working behind the camera simply removes women from the orbit of such prejudices. As I have noted elsewhere (Jermyn, 2003), journalists have long since been compelled to comment on Kathryn Bigelow's arresting looks. Notions of 'beauty' are of course inescapably subjective rather than universal. Nevertheless, within a contemporary Westernised framework, Bigelow possesses a normatively desirable mode of beauty (tall, athletic physique, with flawless features and bone structure, and long dark hair that is frequently worn loose), which is coupled with an often androgynous dress code to striking effect. Notably and somewhat unusually in a culture which entreats older women to graduate towards shorter and lighter 'age-appropriate' hairstyles as they get older, she has retained her long hair into her 60s. The arresting image she thus projects makes her decision to work in 'male genres' (including the biker movie; the rookie cop movie; the war movie) somehow even more intriguing for commentators (see Jermyn, 2003: 127–8), while interviewers remark she is a woman who could seemingly have readily had a career *in front* of the camera (for example, Rynning, 1996: 22). Her longstanding, skillful grasp of frenetic action, and willingness of late to court topical, controversial and 'serious' (read 'masculine') factual subject matter (the Iraq war in *The Hurt Locker* (2008); the killing of Osama Bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012); US 'race riots' and police homicide in *Detroit* (2017)) in a style tellingly described by Martha

P. Nochimson as 'muscular filmmaking' (2010)^{vii}, have made for a deliciously aberrant mix for the media. This has been made fierier still by her having once been married to James Cameron, whom she memorably went 'head-to-head' with (and beat) in the 2010 Oscar nominations for Best Director, all of this serving to ensure she has achieved Sims's 'celebrity director' (2014) status. Even before Bigelow's propulsion into the global media spotlight as the first woman to win the Oscar for Best Director, Yvonne Tasker had observed shrewdly as early as 1999 how, 'Laid-back publicity shots enhance her image: Bigelow in shades, tailored suede, jeans, leather with a moody expression, looking like an extra from one of her own movies... the crafting of her persona is a performance in itself: a New York/LA composite, intellectual yet sensual' (Tasker, 1999). This, then, is definitely *not* 'your mom's favourite director'.

Both Bigelow and Meyers tend to eschew overtly feminine attire, in 'the workplace' at least, as far as can be told from publicity images of them. But in comparison one might say Meyers sports a polished and more low-key 'professional woman' style, often favouring simply cut suits of some kind or turtlenecks, and has a petite stature and full, neatly highlighted hair. As noted, this is a look which does not lend itself to the journalistic fascination that has long accompanied the more readily 'photogenic' Bigelow, who having been born in 1951 is just two years Meyers's junior. As Merkin put it in the *New York Times*, sharing the kind of detail that profiles of male directors are arguably far less likely to feature, 'With her black-framed glasses and penchant for wearing clothes that seem like a softer variant of a man's business suit – white blouse, yellow cardigan over slacks, low-heeled patent-leather pumps – the petite and attractive Meyers might pass for a lawyer or professor' (2009). In essence, then, she is safely ordinary, reassuringly rather dainty even, to the extent that, like a lawyer or professor, you'd likely hardly notice her - not a head-turner like Bigelow. Sofia Coppola, twenty years junior to both Bigelow and Meyers has also, like Bigelow, made it into Sims's celebrity director club albeit via a somewhat different route, and while working in the independent sector (as Bigelow largely has), such that her advancement to this level of recognition offers another trajectory to consider alongside Meyers's non-celebrity status again. Coppola's fame is in part fuelled by her pedigree, as the privileged daughter of auteur Francis Ford Coppola, though to acknowledge the fact of this and her early standing as 'a dilettante socialite' (Smaill, 2013: 151) is not to undermine the skill of her filmmaking, contested though this is by critics. But beyond her celebrity lineage and her relative (though inevitably fading) 'youth' she has, whether by design or not, won media interest on multiple fronts, as a celebrity director with a penchant for fashion and indie music whose films have steadfastly retained 'youth appeal'. Her films are explicitly and recurrently interested in the experiences of *girlhood* (see Handyside, 2016) or 'privileged young

women in phases of transition' (Smaill, 2013: 151), and while both she and Meyers share the distinction of being widely rebuked for (re)making films preoccupied with the experiences of wealthy white protagonists that mirror their own milieu, from *The Virgin Suicides* (1999) to *Marie Antoinette* (2006) and beyond, Coppola's are peopled more notably by nubile young women and girl-stars in contrast to Meyers's ageing protagonists.

While a Google image search of Meyers suggests the documentation of her film premiere appearances has been few and far between, the internet is replete with such images of Coppola. She is, in keeping with a certain set of aspirational feminine values, a woman /director invested in designer style, whose appearances at red carpet events are considered 'statements', and who inhabits the world of high-end, couture fashion (she was photographed by Steven Meisel for the cover of Italian *Vogue* in 1992 and 2014, has modelled for Marc Jacobs, co-founded the clothing line Milk Fed, and interned for Chanel as a teenager). Thus, while her looks might subjectively be considered less conventionally 'beautiful' than Bigelow's, she surely isn't 'your mom's favourite director' either. Instead, she had nurtured an air of coolness or edginess and an 'It Girl' reputation that have combined with her auteur stamp to keep her in the spotlight, where Meyers has remained an ageing, relative non-celebrity, relegated by comparison to the somewhat shadowy margins of Hollywood's gendered publicity machine.

'Experience never gets old?': *The Intern*

While Coppola's work has continued to pivot fertiley around protagonists in their girlhood, from the start of her career Meyers has maintained she is a filmmaker who 'writes what she knows' as she moves through life's shifting stages (see Jermyn, 2017). Thus her protagonists have grown older as she has, just as one imagines many of her women audiences have done too. In certain of her later films this has entailed reflection on her personal experience of having found herself in her early 50s recalibrating life after divorce from her long-term partner, explored through writing single women characters who have aged alongside her. As Amy Larocca put it to her in an interview in *New York* magazine on the release of *The Intern*, 'It seems like you've been writing about yourself since *What Women Want*'^{viii} (Larocca, 2015: 35). Meyers agrees that she written her own experiences, as a woman moving through the life course, into the narrative arcs of her women protagonists, but dates this admission back further still, replying, 'I'm basically the same age as all of the women in my movies. On *Baby Boom*, I was a new mom, I was 37, and that was a movie about juggling and where do I go from here and how do I do it all?' (Larocca, 2015: 35). As I have written elsewhere, three decades on from *Baby Boom*, *The Intern* is still about precisely these questions, in which over-

stretched entrepreneur and mom Jules can be seen as daughter to *Baby Boom*'s high-achieving, agitated 'yuppie' J.C. Wiatt (Jermyn, 2017: 140-141). But the 'dilemmas' of ageing women hold little cultural currency in our society, beyond the neoliberal and capitalist imperative to fuel, exploit and monetize fears of ageing. Hence Meyers's writing of herself as an ageing woman into roles for Keaton and Streep has worked both to make her stand out as 'an auteur for the gerontocom' (Jermyn, 2017: 164) and ensured her work can be readily trivialized and dismissed.

The Intern, though, as a two-hander starring De Niro alongside Hathaway, is a film which, rather more readily than others in Meyers's oeuvre, can be said to give equal weight and contemplation to the perspectives and experiences of both male and female protagonists; indeed, Mara Reinstein's *Us Magazine* review opens by noting 'Mom and Dad will love it' (my emphasis) even while she then immediately goes on to evaluate its potential credentials as 'a future *Girls Night In* classic' (and finds it rather wanting in this regard) (2015). As Meyers tells it, the film is still a personal one for her, in which her voice is heard as a contemplative, ageing professional/working woman whose life has been heavily invested in pursuing a career and whose sense of identity is closely enmeshed in that work. In an interview featured on *thecoveteur.com*, she told how, 'I'm closer to Bob's age than Annie's and definitely not retired, but I can feel that coming and I do wonder what that will be like – so I got to explore my own fears, I suppose' (Ramshaw, 2016). But importantly these reflections on her near-future are explored in the film through an ageing *male* protagonist. As it develops, the film is very much about a young woman's/Jules's narrative too, exploring key transitions in her life course at a different, earlier moment. Indeed, with the exception of charming, vibrant love-interest Fiona (Rene Russo), the fleetingly seen older women of *The Intern* are largely and disconcertingly played for (somewhat barbed) laughs. Fellow senior intern Doris (Celia Weston) features only as an incompetent driver, for example, while Fiona remains frustratingly under-developed, surely a missed opportunity and even an own-goal for Meyers. And with 'bromance' elements seemingly quite consciously incorporated to speak to a greater demographic breadth, buoyed up by the casting of a number of young male actors in bromantic/'slacker male' roles as Ben's new buddies at About the Fit, there is also a (Judd) Apatow-esque inflection to be found at times^{ix} that ensures the under-25 male quadrant will not feel neglected.

But notably, the film opens with *Ben's* voice, *his* piece to camera, and delineates *his* back-story concertedly from the off, as he explains what life is like as a comfortably retired but essentially aimless widower in Brooklyn, yearning for new purpose in his life again now that his wife is dead and

his days as 'a company man' are done. The moving introductory monologue he delivers, explaining how he's occupied his time in these widowed years, is eventually revealed to be his filmed application for a position as a Senior Intern at Jules's thriving online fashion start-up. Her company is doing extraordinarily well the audience soon learns, too well in fact, as Jules tries to cover the minutiae of everything from appeasing a panicked bride-to-be calling to locate her missing bridesmaid dresses, to training staff how to pack the tissue-paper in their delivery parcels. Hence she is asked by her investors to consider bringing in a more qualified CEO who can handle the company's rapid expansion. And it is this backdrop – a commercial world of online fashion retail dismissively described as a 'chick site' by one of her potential new (male) managers, much to Jules's disgust – alongside the fact of Meyers's authorship, that ensured the film would still often be understood by some as merely a 'chick flick' (see Cobb and Negra, 2017), rather than explored as a film with a still uncommon and potentially significant crossover, multiple-quadrant audience appeal. Indeed, Meyers has admitted she wrote the 'chick-site' dialogue and Jules's outrage at the use of the term into her script as a reflection of the frustration she has felt as a director similarly pigeonholed by such language, remarking of the term 'chick flick' that, '[there's] a judgment attached to it, and that judgment is never applied to films that men also go to, though I don't think my movies are just attended by women... we're not on equal footing' (Larocca, 2015: 34).

It is a curious state of affairs, then, to observe that though *The Intern* explores the terrain of retirement, obsolescence and intergenerationality through a male protagonist, in a seeming challenge to those that would argue Meyers is solely driven to explore the lives of women, the film still merited very little serious critical consideration. The chick flick credentials borne by her name seemingly proved too hard to shed, as might be said of Hathaway too, with Mara Reinstein's review, for example, welcoming back 'a gleaming Hathaway in the genre that put her on the movie map' (Reinstein, 2015). While the AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) website's 5-star review spoke warmly of the 'gloriously creased, proudly aging flesh of 72 year old Robert De Niro' (Newcott, 2015), it is important to consider how De Niro's casting was noteworthy in particular ways here, as a male star who has moved from being one of the most celebrated actors of his generation to being one regularly critically derided for his poor choice of (increasingly lightweight comedy) roles in his later career. There is something quite self-conscious, then, in his playing a character here who pushes back against a mounting sense of redundancy in older age to remain a player in the workforce; who confesses on retirement to an overwhelming desire to just keep working, and a need 'to keep moving. Get up, get out of house, and go somewhere. Anywhere', such that he takes a job that he is patently over-qualified for. Furthermore, for Meyers's more vociferous critics it is no

doubt just such a mindset - a '[desperation] to stay busy' (Newcott, 2015), whatever the work entails - that has led the later life De Niro, once famed for provocative, edgy, performances in lauded, violent and darkly-inflected (read 'masculine') films such as Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Raging Bull* (1980) to appear decades on as an amiably engaging figure in a quietly contemplative, intermittently lightly comic film, like *The Intern*. For *Entertainment Weekly*, then, seeing De Niro here was 'like watching a lion who's been defanged and given a tofu bone to gnaw on' (Greenblatt, 2015).

As if seeking to connect with (t)his history, early in the film Meyers appears to deliberately construct a reflexive refrain around De Niro that employs and revisits moments from his youthful 'glory days' as an actor. Of note are Ben's self-conscious opening monologue/solo piece to camera pondering retirement (where he almost appears to look out to the audience and address them directly) that bleeds in and out of a montage voiceover; and a later sequence of him rehearsing how to greet Jules the next day by repeating his 'script' and talking to himself in the mirror; before he eventually becomes her driver and is seen in numerous shots chauffeuring her around the city. These are scenes that echo and resituate De Niro's venerated performance ('You talkin' to me?') as Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*, where the traumatized Vietnam vet is seen similarly preparing for a challenging conversation by watching himself rehearse his dialogue, and driving the urban landscape with an observant, perceptive eye trained on those around him. Now, though, the Oscar-winning star is in the later stages of his career, and transposed to the questionable critical terrain of a Nancy Meyers's film. Here Meyers draws consciously on the performative meanings and histories of ageing and established actors; in a similar vein, numerous reviews of *The Intern* explicitly linked Hathaway's role to her previous performance as new 'Runway' fashion magazine assistant Andy Sachs in the somewhat similarly themed *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)^x. Indeed, this intertextual play is something Meyers has undertaken previously particularly memorably with Keaton and Nicholson in *Something's Gotta Give* (see Jermy, 2012), suggesting a director who very consciously casts certain of her stars to vividly operate as dynamic palimpsests of previous roles and associations, which will hold particular meanings and resonance for knowledgeable, and often older, fans. Tellingly, while the link between Jules/Hathaway and *The Devil Wears Prada* was widely and unproblematically made, Peter Bradshaw's *Guardian* review uncomfortably sought to resist exploring any intertextual linkage around De Niro. The reader can almost feel Bradshaw shuddering as he notes the parallels described above, in which Ben/De Niro talks to himself in the mirror and again plays a kind of omniscient driver around the streets of New York; he remarks aghast that, 'I'm hoping these aren't playful references to *Taxi Driver*' (Bradshaw, 2015), as if fearing the classic, (masculine) auteur text would be sullied in the process of such an association. This response is entirely in keeping with a

recurrent thread in reviews of Meyers's work that warn her off presuming to reference or pay homage to the great (male) directors preceding her (see Jermyn, 2017: 100-1).

Conclusion: How to not 'go with the floe'

All in all, then, for many, *The Intern* was a lacklustre affair, stylishly designed in characteristic Meyers fashion but with a 'habit of recognizing but not correcting gender and age discrimination' (Cobb and Negra, 2017: 5) in which, most problematically, 'a decent, old-school patriarch' (ibid) makes better in-roads into understanding contemporary (post)feminism than the young woman entrepreneur at its core. But importantly, within the critical morass, some reviewers were willing and able (like Newcott, 2015, above) to see something significant, even challenging, in Meyers's film. This included Megan Garber at *The Atlantic*, who noted:

You know who comes out looking great in all this? Ben. This is his film, through and through. *And there's something powerful in that, in the simple fact that The Intern is so sympathetic to its older character—so resolutely on the side of a person who might, in other contexts, be dismissed or ignored or, as is so often the case, invisible...* Ben's resistance to the complacencies that are so often ascribed to the elderly could double as a rallying cry for older people as a group. People who may be retired, but who are not yet tired. People who will not go with the floe (Garber, 2015) (my emphasis).

At one level, then, one might well vigorously critique the film for the manner in which it seems to give the reins of a young(er) woman's story over to a father-figure/older-and-wiser man. But at the same time it is possible to find something refreshing in its willingness to imagine under-explored narratives of inter-generationality, and of ageing - as a time of discovery, agency and hopefulness, not merely reflection or loss - just as Meyers has done previously with the older women protagonists of her romcoms. In keeping with such a reading, one may turn too to The Gerontological Society of America's review of the film, which opens with palpable delight in declaring, 'Not often does a film as entertainingly watchable as *The Intern* carry within it a positive regard for the multigenerational nature of human life in the 21st century' (Vanden Bosch, 2015) (my emphasis). This is the uncommon and timely emphasis that was largely lost in those reviews of the film that saw Meyers's work as only 'a fluffy workplace fantasy' (Robey, 2015) or a 'grown-lady Narnia' (Greenblatt, 2015). And it is one that crucially deserved greater consideration, given the import of the changing global demographics outlined at the start of this article and the suggestion that, 'Market constructions of adulthood and late(r) life set increasingly inescapable parameters for how adults negotiate twenty-first century aging' (Harrington et al, 2014: 4).

Despite all this, however, and again as noted at the start of this work, examining the discourses that circulate so pervasively around ageing women celebrities and fans still seems like academically ‘high-risk’ work. These are figures that have enduringly featured as comparatively negligible to the work of film, media and cultural studies. How, then, might we as celebrity studies scholars insist that these subjects, for so long virtually absent in both the academy and culture as Garber (2015) above indicates, deserve to be, indeed *must* be, part of our agenda, as scholars across other disciplines increasingly interrogate the cultural, political, economic and social ramifications of the ageing population? Collections such as the special edition of *Celebrity Studies* constituted here suggest a sea-change gaining momentum in our field. The multi-perspectival approach adopted in this essay helps illuminate the breathtaking spectrum of interconnected ways in which older and ageing women in particular are sidelined and undermined across culture. What additionally remains to be determined in terms of the work undertaken here, is whether or how the prevalent critical reception of Meyers’s work as primarily an oeuvre of inconsequential ‘chick flicks’ and ‘mom-coms’ might be further challenged; only by questioning and dismantling the values and prejudices at stake in this will a less hackneyed, more nuanced account both of her older women fans, and of the director herself, be possible.

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Last Chance Harvey (Joel Hopkins, 2008)
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Raging Bull (Martin Scorsese, 1980)
The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (John Madden, 2015)
Something's Gotta Give (Nancy Meyers, 2003)
Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976)
The Virgin Suicides (Sofia Coppola, 1999)
What Women Want (Nancy Meyers, 2000)
Zero Dark Thirty (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012)

ⁱ *Something's Gotta Give*, starring Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson generated a worldwide box-office of \$266m worldwide, while *It's Complicated*, starring Meryl Streep, Alec Baldwin and Steve Martin broke \$219m (boxofficemojo.com).

ⁱⁱ More recently in the UK, British Film Institute audience research for the period 2003-2015 shows in 2015 the 55+ audience reached its highest recorded peak since researchers began to track them as a distinct demograph in 2008 (on abandoning the more capacious '45+' category), making up a 12.5% audience share (BFI, 2016: 4).

ⁱⁱⁱ Following its release in 2000, for example, *What Women Want* became both the highest-grossing romcom of all time, and the highest-grossing film directed by a woman.

^{iv} This article explores how the discomfort and resistance Meyers evidently produces amongst irked critics is regularly expressed in the form of their taking pot-shots at her being 'a woman of a certain age'. One might add further that she is frequently critiqued for having a certain grating white middle-class 'smugness' about her too, having recurrently made films set among a wealthy white elite devoid of diversity or inclusivity. An intersectional critique of Meyers's entry into the director's chair must acknowledge that at the same time as her gender places her in an occupational minority, her class and race are markers of privilege that are entirely in keeping with the dominant demographic composition of her profession. For more on the troubling whiteness of Meyers's filmmaking, see Jermyn 2017 (eg 8-9, 88-89).

^{vi} Meyers's Instagram account can be found at @nmeyers, where she posted the *Something's Gotta Give* themed bachelorette party photo on 26 April 2015.

^{vii} Importantly for Nochimson, it is this 'muscular filmmaking' style which has won Bigelow the approval and/or attention of (disproportionately male) critics - and thus the concomitant celebrity this has brought- since it falls in line with a style already long heralded among male auteurs. By contrast, Nochimson notes, critics entertain little interest in the subject matter and more leisurely (read 'feminised') style expounded by preeminent women 'chick flick' directors like Nora Ephron and Nancy Meyers (Nochimson, 2010).

^{viii} As noted above, Meyers directed hit romcom *What Women Want* in 2000.

^{ix} Consider the bromantic themes evident, for example, not only in the explicit reference to the *Ocean's Eleven* franchise during the men's lengthy slapstick 'heist'/ burglary at Jules's mother's house to retrieve an unseemly email sent to her in error by Jules, but the episode of crass bodily humour and 'laddish' sniggering when Ben gets at erection at his desk after receiving a massage from in-house masseuse Fiona (Rene Russo).

^x Hathaway's performance as Jules was read by numerous critics through the lens of her earlier role as Andy Sachs, the ingénue journalist finding her feet in the harsh world of fashion in *The Devil Wears Prada* as assistant to hard-nosed 'Runway' magazine editor Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep). By the time of *The Intern* nearly a decade later, echoes of this role and stylish milieu are felt again with Hathaway having now become the embattled boss and 'graduated to the role of corporate fashion dragon' (Lodge, 2015; see also Robey, 2015), to the extent that *USA Today* posited it as 'a

sequel' (McDermott, 2015). For a detailed discussion of how Jules/Ben in *The Intern* echo numerous roles and performances seen from Hathaway/De Niro, see Paszkiewicz (forthcoming, 2018).