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“Older-Wiser-Lesbians” and Baby-dykes: Mediating age and generation in New Queer Cinema

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Representations of intersections of gender, age, and sexuality can reveal deep-rooted cultural anxieties about older women and sexuality. Images of lesbian ageing are of particular interest in terms of alterity, as the old/er queer woman can combine layers of otherness—not only is she the cultural “other” within heteronormativity, but she can also appear as the opposite of popular culture’s lesbian chic. In this article, a cultural analysis of a range of films—*If These Walls Could Talk 2* (dir. Anderson, Coolidge, and Heche 2000), *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (dir. Babbit 2007), *The Owls* (dir. Dunye 2010), *Hannah Free* (dir. Carlton 2009), and *Cloudburst* (dir. Fitzgerald 2011)—considers diverse dramatisations of lesbian generations. This article interrogates to what extent alternative cinemas deconstruct normative conceptualisations of ageing. Drawing on recent critiques of post-feminist culture, and a range of feminist and age/ing studies scholarship, it suggests that a linear understanding of ageing and the generational underlies dominant depictions of oppositional binaries of young versus old, of generational segregation or rivalry, and the othering of age. It concludes that non-linear understandings of temporality and ageing contain the potential for New Queer Cinema to counteract such idealisations of youthfulness, which, it argues, is one of the most deep-rooted manifestations of (hetero)normativity.

Keywords: lesbians; New Queer Cinema; ageing; feminism; intergeneration

Introduction

In this article I explore how the meanings of ageing, old age and the generational are constructed within a selection of queer films --- *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (dir. Anderson, Coolidge & Heche 2000), *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (dir. Babbit 2007), *Hannah Free* (dir. Carlton 2009), *The Owls* (dir. Dunye 2010), and *Cloudburst* (dir. Fitzgerald 2011) --- which portray different generations of lesbian, bisexual and queer women. There is a growing body of research on feminisms which sets out valuable arguments against generational thinking, critical of its hetero-patriarchal genesis and its

linear understanding of temporality (Hoogland, et al. 2004; Purvis 2004; Roof 1997; van der Tuin 2009). Drawing on these theories in relation to the broader fields of feminist and age/ing studies, this article considers a selection of films that portray older characters or engage with age, ageing and generation in a lesbian, bisexual or queer context. Unlike characters in mainstream representations which present “only one lesbian-like character so that ‘the lesbian’ is given no one to be a lesbian with” (Cottingham 1996, 27), most films discussed in this article include an ensemble cast of queer women (on both sides of the camera), a rare situation that allows these characters’ relationships with other women to be depicted. My analysis of these examples of queer film argues that a linear, oppositional, post-feminist generational logic can, however, still at times work to undermine the transgressive content and innovative form such alternative cinema seeks to explore.

To begin with I will provide a brief outline of the films. *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (hereafter *Walls*), which premiered on 5th March 2000 on HBO, and has since acquired cult status with frequent screenings as part of LGBT or Queer film festivals, comprises a trilogy of lesbian-themed stories, one of which includes an elderly couple. Following the principle set out in the original 1996 abortion-themed film *If These Walls Could Talk* (dir. Cher & Savoca)¹, *Walls* sets out to illustrate the social and political climate of each decade and its attitudes towards lesbian relationships through three short stories set in the 1960s, 1970s and 2000s. Its first story, “1961” (dir. Anderson), depicting the life long

¹ The first *If These Walls Could Talk* centres on personal stories of unwanted pregnancy, highlighting the politics of abortion in three different decades: 1950s, 1970s and 1990s.

relationship of two retired schoolteachers Edith (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abby (Marian Seldes), will be the main focus here.

Itty Bitty Titty Committee (Babbit 2007) --- which took the 2007 festival season 'by storm', winning both the Best Narrative Feature at the South by Southwest and the Melbourne Queer Film Festival --- is a comedy centering on a group of young lesbian feminist activists in their early twenties and including an older character in her fifties, Courtney (played by Melanie Mayron, in her mid-fifties when this film opened). Its director Jamie Babbit, most famous for queer cinema classic *But I'm a Cheerleader* (1999), described this film as 'a punk feminist fairytale'; as inspired by the riot grrl music from the early 1990s and art activists the Guerrilla Girls (Babbit 2007, 3-5). For Ruby Rich, *Itty Bitty* is a subcultural lesbian-feminist 'moment of enlightenment' (2013, 203), both diegetic and extra-diegetic, its incendiary soundtrack inviting the viewer to stand up against hetero-patriarchy. The story centres on Anna (Melonie Diaz) who, already a lesbian, discovers radical (lesbian) feminist theory when she meets and falls for flirtatious Sadie (Nicole Vicius), a member of the radical feminist group 'Clits in Action' or C(I)A. The C(I)A comprise a group of lesbian, bisexual and queer feminists --- Sadie, artist Meat (Deak Evgenikos), Sulamitha (Carly Pope), and trans man Aggie (Lauren Mollica). Before long Anna is radicalized, participating in their direct action campaigns aimed at symbols of hetero-patriarchy and establishments that maintain gender inequality.

The Owls (2010), touted as 'an experimental thriller/film noir', is a collaborative project directed by Cheryl Dunye (best known for the groundbreaking film *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), the first feature film directed by a black lesbian). It centres on four characters, the "Older-Wiser-Lesbians" or Owls --- Lily (Lisa Gornick), Iris

(Guinevere Turner), M.J. (V.S. Brodie) and Carol (Cheryl Dunye) --- who, as is revealed in flashback scenes, accidentally killed a younger lesbian woman, Cricket (Deak Evgenikos). Their quiet lives are disturbed by the arrival of mysterious Skye (Skyler Cooper), who is looking for their lost partner Cricket and suspects the Owls have had something to do with her disappearance.

Finally, *Hannah Free* (dir. Carlton 2009) and *Cloudburst* (dir. Fitzgerald 2011) both portray older lesbian/bisexual characters as protagonists, providing a rare portrayal of the lesbian lifecourse beyond the middle-age. *Hannah Free* depicts the lifelong love affair between Hannah (Sharon Gless, also Kelli Strickland as young Hannah) and Rachel (Maureen Gallagher as older Rachel, Ann Hagemann as younger Rachel). Its 'life-review' format portrays Hannah's and Rachel's relationship throughout the decades, ranging from childhood to old age. *Cloudburst* centers on Stella (Olympia Dukakis) and Dot (Brenda Fricker) --- both described as in their seventies in the official synopsis² --- who decide to elope to Canada when an overprotective and clueless granddaughter admits Dot into an assisted living facility.

How are ageing and 'old age' being construed in this clutch of contemporary lesbian-themed films, films in which conversations about identity and community are so foregrounded? To explore this question, it is helpful to foreground notions of non-linear temporality to challenge the normative meanings of the generational and the conception of ageing as (merely) chronological. For, as I will argue, challenging a linear understanding of temporality, and thus normative constructs of ageing, and challenging

² See "About" on official page: http://www.cloudburstmovie.com/Cloud_Frameset-4.html .

the generational as oppositional and the idealisation of youthfulness is crucial for feminist and queer scholarship as well as for queer cinema as critical praxis.

Age/ing Studies and Older Women on Screen

Feminist film and media studies, like the newly established field of Ageing or Age Studies,³ has recently expanded its engagement with questions of ageing and old age (Chivers 2011; Gravagne 2013; Jermyn and Holmes 2015; Woodward 1991, 1999, 2006). This expansion, together with work on critical cultural gerontology, such as the work of Josephine Dolan and Estella Tincknell (2012), Roberta Maierhofer and Ulla Kriebnernegg, (Maierhofer 2003; Kriebnernegg and Maierhofer 2013), Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner (2012), Lynne Segal (2013) and Maricel Oró-Piqueras and Anita Wohlman (2016) is slowly providing the cultural dynamic required for a more nuanced contemporary understanding of the mediation of age and ageing. A key theme emerging from recent scholarship is the complex relationship between post-feminism and ‘age-positive’ identities.

It is crucial to identify how post-feminism is entangled with an oppositional understanding of generation and a chronological perception of age and ageing. Approaching post-feminism not so much as anti-feminism but as a process by which feminism is simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed, Angela McRobbie (2004) describes post-feminism as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and

³ Whereas Ageing Studies generally focuses on old age, Age Studies’ approach is wider, with a focus on age-identity at any stage of the ageing continuum. See Leni Marshall’s chapter “Constructing the Body of Age Studies” (2015) for a recent account of an emerging body of age studies scholarship.

80s come to be undermined” (255). In this sense, post-feminism is seen as a set of characteristics in public discourses or cultural representations that assume that feminist struggles have ended, that is, that equality has been achieved and women can “have it all” (see M. Lazar 2009). Like McRobbie (2004), Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (2007) show how post-feminist discourse relegates feminism to a distant past. They argue that post-feminism “broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed pastness is merely noted, mourned, or celebrated” (1). Imelda Whelehan similarly notes that “feminism is at one and the same time credited with furthering women’s independence and dismissed as irrelevant to a new generation of women” (2000, 3).

If one core feature of post-feminism is “its persistent obsession with youth” as Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne (2014, 2) posit, its apolitical optimism also requires constant scrutiny as “it is more convenient to forget or obscure the fact of ageing, unpalatable as the prospect remains to the young and the youthful” (Whelehan and Gwynne 2014, 4). The stories Hollywood tends to tell about old age are overwhelmingly ones that still try and reduce ageing to a “manageable and controllable set of representations” (Chivers 2011, xviii). Most of these stories, for instance, tend to revolve around two paradigms of ageing --- the narrative of ageing as decline or that of “successful” or “positive” ageing (Gullette 2004). The metaphor of decline underlies representations of ageing where the older woman is seen as grotesque and monstrous, typical of earlier Hollywood film (like, for instance *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* [Wilder 1950] or *Sunset Boulevard* [Aldrich, 1962]); yet such representations are not

contained within these earlier decades of cinematic history. Strategies of cultural othering, such as the portrayal of ageing bodies as abject (Kristeva 1982; Gilleard and Higgs 2010), or as monstrous and grotesque (Creed 1993) are pervasive and particularly problematic when same-sex desire is embodied. Another manifestation of the narrative of ageing as decline is the portrayal of the older body as prone to illness and death (Markson 2003). According to Kathleen Woodward, the “logic of the disappearing female body would seem to be this: first we see it, then we don’t” (2006, 163);⁴ with contemporary Western society rendering the complex older female body as “paradoxically both hypervisible and invisible” (163).

Such “othering” of age/ing works to consolidate normative age ideologies, such as the master narrative of ageing and decline, and the binary construction that opposes “young” and “old” as polar opposites (Gullette 1997, 2004). Age/ing studies scholars have proposed a more productive understanding of ageing as a “subtle continuum” (Woodward 1991, 6), rather than “the blunt binary of young and old, as if there were only two states of age” (Woodward 1999, xvii). Or as Lynne Segal puts it, as “we age, changing year on year, we also retain, in one manifestation or another, traces of all the selves we have been, creating a type of temporal vertigo and rendering us psychically, in one sense, all ages and no age” (2013, 4). These theorisations propose a non-linear understanding of ageing and are compatible with the work of queer theory in challenging age stereotypes and the normativity of age scripts (Sandberg 2008). Indeed, the notion of queer temporality (Halberstam 2005) has been particularly useful and influential in

⁴ The example used by Woodward here is the character of Schmidt’s wife in *About Schmidt* (Payne 2002), who appears briefly before being “killed-off”.

deconstructing linear, chronological understandings of time and ageing (Port 2012; Krainitzki 2016).

These changing modes of understanding ageing are rarely seen in mainstream cinema, where representations and meanings can generally be perceived as oppositional binaries, aligned to the model of ageing as “decline” or “pathological” old age or, on the other hand, the model of “successful ageing” --- including the “active” as well as sexually desiring and desirable middle aged women (Vares 2009).⁵ The logics of post-feminist culture tend to censor the ageing female body, except in its “successfully” aged, youthful, heterosexualised form (Wearing 2007). In this context, lesbian visibility is similarly characterised by youthful, glamorous, and (hetero)sexualised lesbian and bisexual women, made palatable for heteronormative culture, with “lesbian chic” often emerging as a depoliticised brand of lesbian identity (Hamer and Budge 1994, 11). In this essay I focus on counter-or oppositional cinema texts in order to explore to what extent familiar modes of representing age, ageing and the generational are contested in recent films (some) directed, written and produced by those names synonymous with the New Queer Cinema of the 1990s --- Jamie Babbit, Rose Troche, Cheryl Dunye, and Guinevere Turner.

Lesbian feminist writers’ early interventions (Macdonald and Rich 1984; Copper 1997) often highlighted the exclusion of age and ageing from both feminist theories and lesbian communities alike. Sexism, heteronormativity and ageism intersect, creating

⁵ Television has been identified as the space where normative concepts of femininity and ageing have been contested most consistently, be it in presenting more complex and multi-layered representations of ageing femininities (Jennings and Krainitzki 2015) or transgressive images of old age in new television formats (Krainitzki 2016).

multiple sites of invisibility; and as Barbara MacDonald and Cynthia Rich illustrated, ageism is a point of convergence of many other repressive forces (1984, 61). LGBTQ media/film studies has yet to engage with ageing and old age in a sustained way to complement the study of age/ing, which in terms of gay politics, often remains sequestered within the health and social sciences (Kimmel, Rose and David 2006; Westwood, et al. 2015). The move away from identity politics towards a queer theory-informed approach might explain this reluctance to engage with a “positive images” approach to queer ageing. Yet from an ageing studies perspective --- which would assume it problematic that an older generation is excluded from cultural representation or portrayed through traditional stereotypes --- such moves are premature. Margaret Cruikshank has contended that the identity category “old” has not undergone the same mutation as “woman” and “gay”; that is, away from an identity politics perspective and towards queer theory perspectives, arguing that there is an even greater interest in “maintaining a fixed identity of ‘old’” (2008, 149) and that older people themselves resist “old” as an identity category (150). If queer theory advocates the deconstruction of essentialist binaries, and the “rejection of essentialist understandings of gender and sexual identity” (Juett and Jones 2010, 7), a queer critical praxis ought to engage in a similar deconstruction of essentialist notions of old and young.

The notion of the generational is integral to discussions of ageing. Research around intergenerationality has sometimes considered age segregation as problematic, producing environments “in which ageism and age-based stereotypes can proliferate” (Vanderbeck and Worth 2015, 4-5). Margaret Gullette describes the denomination and origin of terms such as “Generation X”, “Generation Y”, and the “millennials,”

emphasising that the opposition between these younger generations and the “Baby Boomers” is upheld by linguistic tricks for othering (2004, 56), creating binaries of ‘us versus them’ (56). Gravagne similarly posits that the idea of age cohorts “can result in the perception of generation gaps that undermine commonalities between parents and children and destroy any sense of life course continuity or intergenerational connection” (2013, 79).

From a growing body of research on generational feminisms much has been written about the hetero-patriarchal framework of generation as a concept, and its family-oriented and linear narrative. Emphasising the inefficiency of a chronological age-related, linear demarcation of feminism, Jennifer Purvis notes that “it does not seem reasonable, or politically savvy, for feminisms to abide by artificial boundaries, such as age brackets, or any other marker of linear history” (2004, 94). Sam McBean similarly challenges generational models of time (2015), arguing that despite “the dominance of narratives of feminism’s timing as generational, it is my contention that queerer temporalities can easily be located” (2015, 3). From Marcy Adelman’s lesbian feminist perspective, intergenerational connection was fundamental in shaping lesbian identities within a heteronormative society (1986, 15). A post-identity, queer theory-based detachment from gender and sexuality might therefore reject this concern with age-defined sexual identities. This begs the question: does it make sense to advocate generational continuity within a post-identity (both post-feminist and post-lesbian) context? I am thus concerned with the meanings of ageing and old age underlying instances where various generations of lesbian, bisexual or queer women are depicted on screen, whether this intergenerationality is shaped as rivalry, friendship or love.

The trope of invisibility and the “negative” stereotypes predominant in early cinematic history of lesbian representation (Weiss 1992) is slowly being substituted by new modes of representability for lesbian, bisexual and queer women on screen. As B. Ruby Rich wrote, in the 1980s and 1990s there was “an explosion of lesbian filmmaking by a new generation of young filmmakers” (2011, 62) as part of a wider expansion in gay, lesbian and queer film (Dyer and Pidduck 2003). What became known as New Queer Cinema (NQC), after Rich coined the term, offered “a much-needed response to the widely rehearsed problems of positive images” (Stacey and Street 2007, 5). It can be argued that the very term ‘new’ favours a kind of generational logic, or progress narrative, where “waves” of NQC, follow each other, each more transgressive and innovative.⁶ The centrality of “new” might arguably even pre-empt the inclusion of ageing as a queer thematic.

Alternative cinemas, in particular NQC, with its critical praxis and “deconstructive work” (Juett and Jones 2010, 7) are well placed to contest normative ideologies. Yet, challenging the normativity of youth and youthfulness appears one of its shortfalls. Arguably, in order to continue to offer “a challenging voice from the margins (politically and artistically)” (Stacey and Street 2007, 5), it needs to deconstruct the ideologies of age just as it challenged heteronormativity. Understanding ageing through the notion of queer temporality rehearsed by scholars such as Port (2012) and Segal (2013) would allow this deconstruction. Yet sexual desirability remains linked to youthful femininity in alternative -- as much as in mainstream -- cinema. In its pursuit of the “new”, the “obsession with

⁶ This logic permeates the expressions “New Wave” and New Queer Cinema --- see this critique by writers at Global Queer Cinema (<http://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/gqc/2012/10/07/is-there-a-new-wave-of-queer-cinema/>).

death, dying and sex” (Holmlund 2002, 75) in transgressive cinema, simultaneously signals “a deep-seated denial of age and aging” (75)⁷. Whilst the denial of age translates into absence or “apparitionality” of older lesbian or bisexual characters (with a perceived chronological age of sixty plus) within mainstream cinema, as I have argued elsewhere (Krainitzki 2015), middle-aged characters are simultaneously construed as other, revealing cultural anxieties around ageing, old age and the generational. In what follows I pay close attention to elements of post-feminist logic that seems to permeate mainstream- and alternative cinemas alike, in relation to age-identity, intergenerational love, generational segregation, age-otherness, and the idealisation of youth and youthfulness.

Progress narratives

As mentioned before post-feminism assumes the “pastness” of feminism (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1; see also McRobbie 2004). Tamara De Szegheo Lang’s work on LGBT cultural memory similarly explores how the past is often depicted as “tragic” in order to sustain a narrative of progress in present-day LGBT activism (2015). In *Walls*, such a liberal “progress narrative” (Heller 2002) is established decade by decade as the film moves towards what is presented as a more tolerant and equal present.

The key establishing shot in the first story of *Walls*, ‘1961’ (dir, Anderson), places our main characters Edith and Abby at a screening of *The Children’s Hour* (dir. Wyler 1961), a filmic representation of impossible lesbian love and suicide, itself emphasising the interconnectivity of social identities and cultural representations. The constrictions of this socio-political context become evident when, after a brief scene of domestic bliss,

⁷ Holmlund (2002) is discussing lesbian representation in the “deadly doll” films.

Abby suffers an accident and is admitted to hospital, a heteronormative space where their relationship is not recognised. Edith's invisibility as "next of kin" and as a widow, after Abby's sudden death, is at the centre of this depiction of a "tragic past" (de Szegheo Lang 2015). "1961", follows the genre conventions of melodrama from the start --- signified through its inclusion of *The Children's Hour* --- with the final scenes combining the trope of the 'ghostly lesbian' (Castle 1993) with that of the erasure of the ageing female body, as Edith's image slowly dissolves and the camera pans back into an empty house to the sounds of Carmen McRae's song "Bye, Bye Blackbird".

A past-present divide is therefore established in Walls between the tragic ending of "1961" and the "happy ending" of the second and third stories. Following the documentary footage that serves as a divider between decades and stories --- with images of second wave feminist protest marches announcing a change from oppression and silence to rebellion and visibility --- the second story, "1972" (dir. Coolidge), introduces college students Linda (Michelle Williams), Karen (Nia Long), Jeanne (Natasha Lyonne), and Diane (Heather McComb). Excluded from the feminist society they helped to set up, their experience of discrimination depicts the well-documented tensions between feminists and lesbian feminists in the 1970s. When Linda meets Amy (Chloe Sevigny) their budding relationship encounters opposition from Linda's friends, who disapprove of Amy's "mannish" lesbian identity. The scene at a butch/femme lesbian bar, where they first meet is representative of another well-documented rift --- the tensions between lesbian-feminists and butch-femme identities (Smith 1989). In addition to feminist politics and class background, there is another identity category that clearly sets the group of college students apart from the other patrons in the bar: age. This new generation of

young, college educated, lesbian feminists refuses traditional butch/femme identities as old-fashioned, traditional and heteronormative in an era of progressive lesbian-feminist equalitarian sexualities. The good/bad (Hamer and Budge 1994; McKenna 2002) lesbian dichotomy is here established between the glamorous, young lesbian feminists and the older, working-class butch/femme patrons at the bar. Whereas the post-feminist logic would generally oppose “the bad political lesbian who was anti-men, anti-sex and anti-fashion” (Hamer and Budge 1994, 11) to the “new brand of 1990s lesbian, gorgeous, glamorous and, like any other good fashion accessory, devoid of any political meaning” (11), within this story, 1970s lesbian feminism itself is reframed as glamorous and sexy. To some extent, it could be argued, contemporary post-feminist norms are retroactively mapped into the 1970s. By equating sexual attractiveness with a youthful, fit and slender body, Amy’s youthful (soft) butch identity is made “consumable” (Ciasullo 2001, 579), as opposed to other butch lesbians in the bar, mostly older, some of them fat, all of them staring with a mix of contempt and disapproval at the giggling friends. Despite the opposition Amy and Linda face from both lesbian-feminist ideology and the heteronormative society they inhabit, theirs is a happy ending.

The final story, “2000” (dir. Heche), confirms this “progress” by adopting a romantic comedy genre and portraying the antics of modern-day lesbian couple Cal (Ellen DeGeneres) and Fran (Sharon Stone) as they experiment with artificial insemination. The family planning clinic is a heteronormative space that does nonetheless accept their relationship as legitimate. When their pregnancy test is finally positive, their victory dance proclaims that “the walls previously barring gays and lesbians from access to the protections and privileges of mainstream American life have been broken down”

(Heller 2002, 89). The happy ending to Cal's and Fran's story and the trilogy as a whole chimes with arguments that post-feminist discourse relegates feminism to a distant past (McRobbie 2004). This ending conveys the idea that acceptability, visibility and certain rights have now been achieved and that discrimination is a thing of the past, rendering contemporary feminist action superfluous (Keegan 2006; Ahmed 2009).

Walls is then problematic in that its narrative of progress mobilises an intergenerational dynamic in which old age is pushed into the past, and youth is aligned with the present. The past-present binary is here sustained by other oppositional binaries such as old/young, tragic/comic, invisibility/visibility. The film aligns the "tragic past" with the experiences of lesbian ageing, thus excluding the older characters ("1961") from the progressive present. Walls is unashamedly linear in its move from a pre-Stonewall context to the moment of second wave feminism to a relatively de-politicised post-feminist era. It makes a series of alignments between a traumatic past, a tragic accident, bereavement, loss and widowhood, experienced by an older woman. Compared to "1972" and "2000", where the protagonists are youthful and sexualised, the characters in "1961" are othered through the trope of asexual old age, loss and decline. It taps into a wider filmic convention of the death of an older woman being used as a trigger for narrative action, her erasure allowing other characters to develop (Gallagher 2009; Woodward 2006). In this particular instance, the attempt to create "positive" images of lesbian and queer women "searching for the same things we all want – love and acceptance" as executive producer Ellen DeGeneres described in an interview (Vaillancourt 1999), is undermined by Abby's and Edith's portrayal as the aged-other, reifying ageist

assumptions such as the inevitability of death and the asexuality of old age in accordance with a master narrative of decline.

Analysing this film from an ageing studies perspective highlights the limitations that its 'positive'- contemporary image approach entails; for, as Holmlund argues, "Positive' images are not positive for everyone, and 'truth' is very much in the eye of the beholder" (2002, 88). Despite its achievements, then, the linear progress narrative (de Szegheo Lang 2015) employed by Walls reveals both the pervasiveness of normative age constructs and illustrates its limitations for LGBTQ politics.

Lesbian feminism and the generational divide

Walls is constructed around conventional conceptions of temporality, resulting in a narrative where a depoliticised version of lesbian identity represents the apex of progress. However, as scholars such as McBean (2015) have pointed out, a linear understanding of temporality is unproductive both in terms of nuanced generational understandings of feminism and ageing (5-6). Recent conceptualisations of queer temporality have proven fruitful in deconstructing linearity, the binaries of old age and youth, and the paradigms of decline and success (Port 2012; Segal 2013).

With *Itty Bitty*, Jamie Babbit explicitly sought to present issues of sexism and gender inequality to and for a new generation of girls. "[D]iscouraged by the political apathy of the gay community and the reluctance of young girls to call themselves feminists, I wanted to make a film that shined a new light on these issues" (2007, 3). The film does so by returning to moments of 'past glory', taking inspiration from earlier moments of lesbian-feminist feature filmmaking. Described by B. Ruby Rich as an

homage to Lizzie Borden's feminist classic *Born in Flames* (Borden 1983), *Itty Bitty* mixes "the bad-boy energy of early New Queer Cinema [...] with lesbian-feminist anger, boisterous boasts, and furious ambition, all aiming to shake things up" (2013, 209). However, in providing feminism with a 'makeover', *Itty Bitty* simultaneously often inadvertently conforms to dominant generational discourses casting "old" feminists against "new" feminists (see Whelehan 2000, 4).

Sadie's long-term partner Courtney stands for the "old" feminist practices, which are in stark opposition to the new "sexy" feminist practices in which the younger characters engage. Courtney runs the non-profit organisation Women for Change, representing institutionalised feminist practices, formal meetings and budgets. The intergenerational couple embody some of the tensions between different generations of feminists. This opposition becomes first apparent in a scene where the C(I)A gang have dinner at Courtney's and Sadie's. At the table, Courtney sits at the centre --- the powerless matriarch --- who disapproves of what she frames as pointless theorising and distastefully frank references to sexuality by Sadie and her friends. Courtney's critique establishes the dominant generational rivalry through which different feminist theories are represented as oppositional (Purvis 2004). More than intergenerational feminist "bickering", Courtney's antagonism is fuelled by the realisation that Sadie is being unfaithful to her.

Courtney is relegated to the margins, the "other" to the youthful characters both in terms of narrative and characterisation. With Anna as the protagonist --- Anna's political awakening as a feminist, as well as her attraction to Sadie, is at the centre of the narrative --- Courtney becomes the obstacle in the way of the happy ending. The scene where

Courtney is introduced places her at the edge of her own sitting-room, the camera aligned with Sadie and her friends, looking up at the intruder who is asking them to “keep it down”. In this and subsequent scenes, Courtney is characterised as the controlling mother and “nagging” wife, well-rehearsed stereotypes of female ageing, creating a gap between old and new feminists. As Gullette (2004) and Gravagne (2013) both suggest, generational stereotypes and age-based cohorts tend to undermine commonalities between generations. In this instance, it is Courtney’s and Sadie’s fading relationship, rather than fundamental political differences that act as wedge between the two groups of feminists here portrayed.

As Sadie Wearing points out, generational politics are central to the “representations of the past and the future of feminism” (2007, 278-279) and the feminist/post-feminist divide is often represented as a “a struggle for autonomy between ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’” (281). By aligning oppositional feminist discourses with same-sex intergenerational love, the mother-daughter relationship becomes an incestuous one. In her critique of the generational, Purvis describes the inadequacy of this heteronormative model, and suggests that rather “than move away from a dysfunctional family dynamic toward one that works, it is crucial that we contest the familial components of a generational framework from a position of informed critical insight” (2004, 118).

The strict adherence to the ‘oppositional’ generational discourse --- aided by the depiction of the older lesbian woman according to cinematic clichés, such as the rejected wife (depicting an older woman’s real or imagined fear of being substituted by a younger

lover),⁸ the controlling mother, and nagging wife, and presenting age-appropriate coupling as narrative closure --- aligns this film with the generational logic of post-feminism. Despite its gritty punk aesthetic and theme of personal and political empowerment, *Itty Bitty* reproduces post-feminist binaries of new versus obsolete and young versus old, meaning that in the process these particular aspects of heteronormative culture remain unchallenged. While gender and sexual identities are successfully dismantled and portrayed beyond a binary construction, age and generation remain attached to a linear, chronological understanding of temporality and its binaries of old vs. young.

Queer cinema and Generational anxiety

Lesbian-feminism, as Astrid Henry points out, has not been impervious to these post-feminist generational anxieties and oppositional binaries (Henry 2004). If the move from the identity “lesbian” to the more gender neutral “queer” is indicative of the disavowal of identity politics in favour of queer theory in a post-identity world (see C. Farquhar 2000), then the expression “gay girl” is symptomatic of our current Western post-feminist landscape, where girlhood is often imagined as normative, “as being for everyone” (Tasker and Negra 2007, 18). Rand’s analysis of the representation of the Lesbian Avengers, an activist group of the early 1990s, in public discourse (in magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Mademoiselle*) reveals a focus on a “generational difference

⁸ This theme occurs in several films portraying heterosexual middle aged women who unite against their ex-husbands *The First Wives Club* (Wilson 1996); who suspect and then gather proof their husband is being unfaithful *The Women* (English 2008); or in a recent reversal where the younger lover’s mother turns out to be the preferred love interest *Something’s Gotta Give* (Meyers 2003).

between today's young lesbians, or 'baby dykes,' and their old-school lesbian predecessors [assuming] an abrupt shift between an older, closeted generation and the new publicly gay girls" (2013, 125). The foregrounding of this generational divide in *The Owls* (Dunye 2010) presents us with two cohorts of queer women. The "older wiser lesbians", Lily, Iris, M.J. and Carol (none over the age of fifty), were once involved in rock and political activism, and now have settled down in a quiet desert town. The younger generation of queer women are here represented by genderqueer Skye and baby-dyke Cricket.

As in *Itty Bitty*, *The Owls*' (lesbian) feminist agenda is evident. *The Owls* is produced by "The Parliament Collective" whose very name connotes the second wave feminist ideals of co-operative and productive sisterhood associated with feminist magazines such as *Spare Rib*⁹ in Britain, and *Off Our Backs*¹⁰ in the US; and film production units like "Leeds Animation Workshop" in the UK and New York's "No Wave Cinema" in the USA. As with these forerunners, The Parliament Collective's expressed aim is to create "new ways of storytelling and producing that falls outside of the commercial and independent cinema worlds" (The Parliament Collective 2010, no page). It presents a reflection on topical issues, including ageing and inter-generational dialogue, with the main focus on generational conflict arising from Dunye's perception of "the huge gaps in queer culture between 'those who fought to create our identities' and 'those who simply live it'" (The Parliament Collective 2010, no page). This is a

⁹ See the *Spare Rib* Digitisation Project page and in particular Kimpton Nye's introduction: <http://www.bl.uk/spare-rib/articles/introduction-spare-rib-the-first-nine-years>.

¹⁰ <http://www.offourbacks.org/>

controversial theme rarely addressed on screen and is testament to The Owls’

“experimental content and form” (Juhasz 2010a, 2).

Feelings of generational antagonism, distrust and resentment are addressed by character monologues and actress’ B-camera commentary. The theme of a generation’s disappointment with the lack of recognition and respect from their younger lesbian peers is conflated with Dunye’s frustration with the state of lesbian screen representation, as she confesses in mockumentary-style montages that intersect with the main narrative sequence. Carol (Dunye) confesses her ageing anxiety; she sees her wrinkles, grey hair, feels lost and is disenchanted with “the sisterhood”. Alexandra Juhasz comments on this “generational divide” she observed on set “on the one ‘side,’ the nostalgic celebration of the lesbian or female or feminist, on the other, those seeking a more radical gender and sexual unmooring detached from outdated dependence upon the ‘female’” (2010, 259). This divide and miscommunication is played out on screen by Carol and Skye. Carol’s celebration of black feminist thought can be seen as nostalgic --- when she quotes Audre Lorde Skye is defiantly oblivious and states “I am not political”. Skye’s gender-queer sexuality as well as a disavowal of a politicised, black lesbian identity distances Skye from Carol, whose lesbian identity is founded on her commitment “to sisterhood, to empowerment, to building community”. Carol/Dunye’s generation --- “those who fought to create our identities” (The Parliament Collective 2010, no page) --- have failed as evidenced by those who like Skye “simply live it” (The Parliament Collective 2010, no page). Skye, who has fought for the US army, expresses resentment towards an older generation through a critique of their lifestyle choices. Skye’s use of “lazy bitches”, who are “pathetic”, “old and useless” to describe Carol and her friends, expresses an extreme

and caricature-like loathing. Compared to Skye, the Owls' life is depicted as stagnant, stuck in their past and unable to move on from that fateful night when they accidentally killed Cricket. Skye is the mysterious stranger who will set them free; as generational rebellion turns into literal obliteration when Skye takes revenge for Cricket. Dunye's experimental queer style is evident in *The Owls* refusal to comply with conventions of producing "positive" images of LGBT individuals or the comfort of narrative closure. As several shots are fired, spectators are left wondering who survived, and *The Owls* returns to its extra-diegetic B-camera comments from the crew, as end credits run on the other half of the screen.

The Owls's queer praxis consists in addressing polemical themes such as intergenerational violence, resentment and mere miscommunication within LGBTQ communities and thus demands "ways of seeing and being within uncertainty and conflict, taken from a space of collaboration, while allowing wedges to be visible, a stop to the loop" (Juhasz 2010b, 273). Although "[a]nxieties may inspire beneficial feminist thought and action" (Purvis 2004, 115), this film arguably works to reify the post-feminist oppositional discourse between young and old and thus does not deconstruct one main element of heteronormativity that permeates mainstream and alternative cinemas alike. By focusing on the middle-aged, it can tend to render invisible older, lesbian and queer women who are in their sixties and beyond. At times, and much like the "straw-feminisms" used to reify the opposition between the second and third waves (Purvis 2004), the opposition between the "older wiser lesbians" and "baby-dyke" Cricket and Skye can appear forced and caricaturesque. *The Owls*' generational rhetoric assumes that ideological differences between groups of lesbian, bisexual and queer women are based

on chronological age. This age gap, as Gravagne argued in relation to the notion of age cohorts (2013, 79), effaces any existing commonalities and makes it difficult to establish intergenerational connections. According to Lisa Hogeland, the “effect of using claims of generational difference to stand in for political difference is to reify ageism in the movement --- on both sides of a putative generational divide” (2001, 108). Even read as a critique of these oppositional generational relations *The Owls* restricts dialogue around this controversial topic by focusing on middle-age.

In the following section I consider whether by representing queer old age as part of the wider spectrum of lesbian and queer identities, alternative generational discourses emerge.

Old age and lesbian experience

Hannah Free (2009) is set in a nursing home, where butch Hannah struggles with being confined to a hospital bed. Kept from visiting her life partner Rachel who lies in a coma in the same building, Hannah talks to (young) Rachel’s ghost, reminiscing about their past, presented through flashback scenes. *Cloudburst* (2011) centers on 70-something Stella and Dot, who decide to elope to Canada when an overprotective granddaughter, Molly (who assumes Stella and Dot are only friends), admits Dot into an assisted living facility. Stella breaks in and rescues Dot; they set off in their red pick-up truck and, along the way, meet hitchhiker Prentice, who joins them on their road trip.

To a certain extent both films comply with the paradigm of the ghosted lesbian, and participate in the depiction of ageing as decline --- both end with the death of one of the women. This means old age is yet again othered, and ageing and generation remain

attached to a linear, chronological understanding of temporality and its binaries of old vs. young.

There is however one fundamental, and crucial difference --- the older characters are protagonists, and their stories and relationships are placed at the center of the narrative. Feminist concerns are thus addressed from an age-inclusive perspective, such as the problems of institutionalization into nursing homes, a lesbian couple's lack of legal rights and ongoing family tensions. Ageing and old age are thus foregrounded not as a threat or as the other but as one identity marker among many. In Hannah Free, for instance, Hannah and Rachel are not restricted to one age category, and their old age, illness and fragility are not presented as their main characteristic. The movement between scenes set in the nursing home and flashback scenes, depicting the characters as children, young adults and as older women, gives the impression they are all ages and none, creating a type of temporal vertigo, as defined by Segal (2013). Hannah Free's inclusion of extensive flashback scenes and non-linear narrative --- 'the free manipulation of time and space, and back and forth movement of flashback and flashforward, mapping vast territories of the mind' (Shalev-Cohen 2011, 9) --- allows for a more complex and nuanced version of lesbian ageing and the possibility of queer normativities of age and identity.

The main intergenerational conflict in this film is established between Hannah and Rachel's daughter Marge (Taylor Miller), who does not accept Hannah's and Rachel's relationship. Hannah's friendship with Greta (eventually revealed to be her partner's grandniece, and who also comes out as a lesbian), who assists Hannah in her escapades to see Rachel, allows a rare depictions of an intergenerational encounter between queer

women on screen. When Greta is allowed to read Hannah's journals, there is an exchange of lesbian heritage, as well as family history. The deathbed scene in *Hannah Free* evokes the familiar trope of the death of an older woman. In this instance however, rather than a trigger for narrative action, it enables an intergenerational encounter of care and reconciliation. Greta is the agent of reconciliation as three generations gather around Rachel.

In *Cloudburst*, the intergenerational conflict is similarly established between family members, with Stella and Dot one side and Dot's granddaughter, Molly (Kristin Booth) on the other. As Stella sets out to rescue Dot from the care home, the characters distance themselves from this conventional institutional setting which often frames narratives of old age and biological family. Instead, a mutually beneficial relationship is established between the older women and their protégé Prentice. *Cloudburst* is explicitly lesbian-feminist in claiming civil rights and agency in determining healthcare options for older lesbian women (the film predates the extension of marriage rights to same sex couples in USA). By portraying lesbian characters outside the limited paradigm of the youthful, sexy lesbian, *Cloudburst* ties "sexual desire to the more limited desires of late life to choose where to live as a couple" (Chivers 2015, 137).

Dot's sudden death repeats a familiar device of narrative closure in lesbian-themed film and thus the film does not challenge a linear understanding of ageing or age stereotypes in a consistent way. The closing shots are of Stella and Prentice, rather than of the lesbian couple. Yet such tropes do not cancel out other moments of transgression. Stella's queer performativity of "the little old lady" disrupts notions of traditional age- and gender-identity. She first disguises herself as an "old lady" --- complete in a

headscarf, flowery nightgown, slippers and stick --- when rescuing Dot from the care facility. By performing this stereotype of female ageing, Stella blends in to the institutional setting where such age-appropriate attire is norm. She resorts to the headscarf once more to disguise her masculinity when hitchhiking. To the driver's surprise, the little old lady he picks up turns out to be foulmouthed butch lesbian.

By focusing on the experiences of lesbian ageing, Hannah Free and Cloudburst ensure that old age is understood as a lesbian-feminist matter. Both can be seen as contesting “the familial components of a generational framework” (Purvis 2004, 118), establishing connections that are foremost based on friendship and recognition (Greta), based on mutually beneficial collaborations beyond family ties, or shared gender or sexual identity markers (Prentice). In many ways Hannah Free's non-linear narrative and less conventional form challenge the decline narrative more consistently than Cloudburst's queering of the roadtrip genre. While both films include the “killing off” of one of the older characters, Hannah Free's inclusion of extensive flashback scenes present a more multifaceted version of a lesbian lifecourse and rehearses intergenerational encounters that might or might not be contained within a biological family setting. The film thus opens up possibilities for queer cinema to include older generations of women beyond the normativity of youth and hypersexuality.

Conclusion

In this article I have focused on representations of normative constructions of ageing within recent queer cinema: highlighting the rendering abject of lesbian ageing, the conservative temporalities of generational segregation or conflict, and the construction of

young and old as oppositional binaries. While lesbian-themed cinema intervenes as a counter-narrative in a predominantly heteronormative cinematic landscape, its idealisation of youthful(ness) and consequent “othering” of ageing is an ongoing issue. The perpetuation of ageist stereotypes and conventional age narratives within alternative cinemas can undermine counter-cinema’s transgressive agenda. This means that normative meanings of “old” are reiterated, rather than challenged by “fluid, changing, and indeterminate” (Cruikshank 2008, 49) understandings of age. The recent expansion in scholarship of ageing has foregrounded the necessity to understand its in/visibilities, in particular in regards to ageing femininities, and, “if ‘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” (Wearing 2007, 298). Emerging images of middle-aged and older lesbian, bisexual and queer women similarly warrant our attention in terms of the conceptualisation of ageing and the generational. If cinema is best suited as a vehicle to represent old age (Cohen-Shalev 2011, 9) not in a chronological, linear fashion but in order to express the ageing process as continuum, rendering us “all ages and no age” (Segal 2013, 4), a queer cinema praxis would be an ideal forum to challenge gender-, sexuality, and age-normativity. As I have argued, however, there are signs that some New Queer Cinema is becoming more queer in its temporalities. Films such as *Hannah Free* or *Cloudburst*, as discussed here, have shifted the focus away from a seemingly compulsory youthfulness towards a more nuanced portrayal of the lesbian

lifecourse. Their transgression is less about sexuality and more about queering chrononormative age-identities such as “sweet” or “little old lady.”¹¹

My article has both drawn attention to the limitations of New Queer Cinema --- such as compliance with post-feminist notions of lesbian identities or a youth-centric understanding of queerness --- and explored the emerging possibilities of its engagement with ageing. The notion of queer temporality has the potential to challenge traditional understanding of ageing and age identity; thus a queer critical praxis ought to engage in a similar deconstruction of essentialist notions of old and young. Alternative cinema that engages with queer temporarily in order to counteract the post-feminist normativity of youth engages with one of the most deep-rooted manifestations of hetero-patriarchal culture.

¹¹ Much like I argued elsewhere in relation to the representation of older female prisoners in Orange is the New Black (dir. Jenji Kohan 2013-) (Krainitzki 2016; see also Maierhofer 2003).

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