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**‘MISSING PERSONS’?**  
**REPRESENTATIONS OF MATURE FEMALE SEXUALITY**  
**IN BRITISH AND IRISH FILM 1998-2011**

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**ABSTRACT**

Research has indicated that a number of recent US films have challenged hegemonic definitions of mature women as asexual by validating the sexual pleasure and sexual agency of female characters over forty five years of age. This paper seeks to ascertain whether, and to what extent, this ideological shift is being replicated in British and Irish cinema. A content analysis establishes the number of British and Irish films, either domestic productions or co-productions, in which a mature female protagonist, or central character, is sexually active or demonstrates sexual desire.

A thematic, qualitative analysis of the corpus suggests that, in accordance with research on US films, the narratives of a small number of British and Irish films do indeed offer mature female sexuality conditional support, within certain parameters. With one exception, narratives implicitly identify marriage or romantic love as the appropriate forum for a mature character to express her sexuality. Further, the representation of active female sexuality is quite restrained in the vast majority of such films; it is primarily confined to an on-screen kiss and the majority of simulated sexual activity occurs pre- or post-coitus. Even if mature female characters are depicted as sexually active, the mature female body usually remains strategically concealed. Finally, mature female characters are white, middle class, slim and able-bodied women.

**KEYWORDS**

Women; Film; Sexuality; Ageing; Narratives; Representation

**Introduction**

Midlife and older women are significantly underrepresented as protagonists and central characters in US and UK film narratives (Sharp;2006;Tally, 2008; Lauzen, 2012) while, to date, Irish films have largely evaded any analysis through the lens of age. Older women languish on the margins in the vast majority of films but there is another layer of invisibility that is the focus of this paper. Mature female characters, even if they are included in film narratives, more often than not, are represented as asexual. A snapshot of the representational history of older women is instructive: from the 1930s to the 1970s female characters over the age of fifty years of age were represented as ‘saintly and asexual mothers’ (Stoddard,1983, p.19); Oscar

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<sup>5</sup> The title is inspired by Kathleen Woodward’s observation that the older woman has been ‘a missing person’ in psychoanalysis and feminist criticism (see Woodward, 1995).

winning female actors over sixty five years of age were 'peripheral to the action, represented as rich dowagers, wives/mothers or lonely spinsters' in films from 1929 to 1995 (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p.137); women enjoy a shorter screen life than men and vanish from the screen at an earlier age (Lauzen and Dozier, 2005, p.443; Lauzen, 2012, p.2).

However, there are signs that discourses of mature female sexuality in the wider culture are beginning to change and the ageing process itself is being reconceptualised. Margaret Tally's (2006; 2008) and Rose Weitz's (2010) work on US narrative films suggests that while sexually active midlife women are still invisible in the overwhelming majority of US films, there are indications that a small number of film narratives are now reconsidering whether midlife women 'must renounce their sexuality because they are no longer young' (Tally, 2006, p.129). That said, Tally found that even these more progressive films also express a sense of ambivalence about older female sexuality and have 'an almost compulsive need to show these women come back into the family fold' (Tally, 2008, p.130).

Weitz's (2010) work provides a springboard to my own focus; she carried out a content analysis on the extent and nature of the representation of 'midlife' (45-64 years) sexuality in US narrative films from 2000 to 2007. As US 'baby boomers' age, Weitz argues, an apparent 'cultural shift' is taking place which includes increased interest in later-life sexuality. Her study stems from an interest in ascertaining to what extent 'a cultural acceptance' of specifically midlife female sexuality had developed in screen narratives as 'film producers have more motivation than ever before to address midlife issues' (Weitz, 2010, p.19). Weitz found that, of the 4000 films released into US cinemas between 2000 and 2007, thirteen films portrayed sexually active midlife women. Hence, a small number of recent films do affirm mature sexuality, albeit within clear boundaries: sexuality is expressed within committed relationships, within age appropriate couples, and among white, middle-class, slim women (Weitz, 2010, p. 27). This paper is concerned with whether, and to what extent, British and Irish films are mirroring the small, but arguably significant, changes evidenced in US film since the late 1990s.

The scope of this piece of work differs from much of the previous British research on ageing femininity in film (Whelehan, 2010; Wearing, 2011). Rather than undertake a close reading of a small number of high profile films through the lens of age, the approach adopted here seeks to gain an overview of the representational landscape by providing a numerical base to a primarily qualitative analysis. The ethnographic 'turn' within audience research constructs audience members as active agents in the reception of media texts (Lull, 1999; Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984). Texts can be 'read' in a number of ways; 'they offer dominant cultural interpretations as well as possibilities to read against the grain' (van Zoonen and Costera Meijer, 2002, p.331). However, a focus on film narratives remains a significant undertaking because media content provides such an important source of meaning about the social world, including hegemonic assumptions about mature female sexuality. That said, it should

be noted that the importance of the production context cannot be overstated but, unfortunately, such an analysis is outside the scope of this paper.

## Methods

### Content Analysis

Mindful of Jane Stokes's argument that 'the strongest use of content analysis is to provide reliable data to support interpretative analysis' (2003, p. 66), a small-scale content analysis was undertaken to establish whether Weitz's (2010) US findings are echoed in British and Irish film, 1998-2011. John Deacon's assertion that (sometimes) 'frequency of occurrence does count' is persuasive (2008, p. 95). Having a quantitative base to interpretative work allows for: 'the identification, naming and categorisation of marginalised social groups [...] an essential precondition for them to receive support, resources and respect' (Deacon, 2008, p. 96).

In order to identify the British films that were relevant to the research question I consulted the UK Film Council Statistical Year Book, 2002-2010<sup>6</sup> and the BFI Statistical Yearbook, 2011-2012. Only films between 1998 and 2012, with a minimum budget of £500,000 are included (BFI, 2012, p. 159). The Irish Film Board Film Directory (1992-2012) provided information relating to Irish films of the same period. In case I had inadvertently overlooked any relevant material, I cross-referenced my list of British and Irish films with films that are indexed within the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com); the British Film Institute (BFI) website, [www.bfi.org.uk](http://www.bfi.org.uk); the Sight and Sound archive [www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound](http://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound) magazine; BFI Screenonline, <http://www.screenonline.org.uk>, – decade by decade; the London Independent Film Festival (LIFF) Winners and Official Selection Listings, 2007-2012 [www.londonindependent.org/press.htm](http://www.londonindependent.org/press.htm) and Britmovie, [www.britmovie.co.uk](http://www.britmovie.co.uk), using the key words: older women, midlife women, younger man/older woman. However, I acknowledge that, despite attempts to uncover every relevant British and Irish film produced from 1998-2011, it is still conceivable that there were unintentional omissions, though I am confident that any omissions are minor and would not distort the findings.

The the Internet Movie Database was consulted in order to identify the ages of all relevant female actors; and, with one exception, this was successful.<sup>7</sup> Films were assessed with reference to plot résumés and those that did not include a sexually active, female actor, aged forty five years and upwards, as a protagonist or central

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<sup>6</sup> The UK Film Council was disbanded in early 2011 and subsequent statistical yearbooks were published by the BFI. Although statistical yearbooks were not compiled until 2002, they carry relevant information on British film for the period 1998-2012 thus facilitating my analysis.

<sup>7</sup> Information relating to Jackie Howe, the protagonist in *Come on Eileen* (2010) was subsequently provided by Blinder, the film's Dublin-based production company.

character, were disregarded. Twelve films from a total of 1,391 British films<sup>8</sup> produced between 1998 -2011 (Table 1) and five films from a total of one hundred and sixty two Irish films, produced during the same period (Table 2) represent mature female sexuality.

**Table 1: British Films Surveyed**

Film	Year Released	Mature Actress	Actress' Age (at film release)	Mature Woman as Protagonist / Central Character
Saving Grace	2000	Brenda Blethyn	54	Yes
Undertaking Betty	2002	Brenda Blethyn	56	Yes
Calendar Girls	2003	Helen Mirren	58	Yes
		Julie Walters	53	Yes
The Mother	2003	Ann Reid	68	Yes
Ladies in Lavender	2004	Judi Dench	70	Yes
Being Julia	2004	Annette Bening	46	Yes
Keeping Mum	2005	Kristin Scott Thomas	45	Yes
Notes on a Scandal	2006	Judi Dench	72	Yes
Ruby Blue	2007	Josiane Balasko	57	Yes
Irina Palm	2007	Marianne Faithful	55	Yes
Mamma Mia!	2008	Meryl Streep	59	Yes
The Last Station	2009	Helen Mirren	64	Yes

This initial quantitative overview facilitated the selection of a corpus for further analysis. Each film in the corpus was viewed multiple times and the themes that emerged in Weitz's findings – sexual absences, sexual gazes, affirming sexuality, sexual agency and sexual boundaries - also emerged in my corpus. Additionally, two further themes surfaced and were incorporated into my analysis; first, representations which indexed a specific link between motherhood and sexuality (maternal sexuality) and expressions of sexual desire that are not object-specific (sexual being) which registers the mature female character's sense of herself as sexual even when sexual intimacy, per se, is not developed in the narrative.

**Table 2: Irish Films Surveyed**

<sup>8</sup> Prior to 2011, the statistical yearbooks, from which I gathered the data on British films only registered films with budgets of £500,000, and over. Low budget and micro-budget films were not tracked by the UK Film Council at all, until 2008. Hence, it was reluctantly decided to exclude them from this analysis but I am persuaded that the absence of this category is not numerically significant and does not distort my findings.

Film	Year Released	Mature Actress	Actress' Age (at film release)	Mature Woman as Protagonist/Central Character
Night Train	1998	Brenda Blethyn	52	Yes
Agnes Brown	1999	Anjelica Huston	48	Yes
Tara Road	2005	Andie MacDowell	47	Yes
A Tiger's Tail	2007	Kim Cattrall	51	Yes
Come On Eileen	2010	Jackie Howe	48	Yes

## Analysis

### Sexual Absences

As Table 1 and Table 2 indicate, midlife sexuality is absent in the vast majority of films produced in Britain and Ireland. Only twelve British films and five Irish films from the period 1998-2011 represent mature female sexuality. The category of 'sexual absence', as it pertains to the discussion here, relates to specific exclusions orchestrated by the narrative even in films that do challenge widely-held beliefs about the asexual nature of mature women. In five of the British films, *Saving Grace* (2000), *Undertaking Betty* (2002), *Irina Palm* (2007), *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *The Last Station* (2009), the only sexual activity engaged in by the protagonist is a passionate on-screen kiss. In *Saving Grace*, however, even the kiss is deferred by the narrative. Thus, recently widowed Grace Trevethyn (Brenda Blethyn) channels her horticultural expertise to the growing of marijuana plants in an effort to save her home from her dead husband's creditors. In the film, Grace tangles with French drug dealer, Jacques Chevalier (Tcheky Karyo). However, it is only in the closing minutes of the film that the audience learn, in a simulated television news report, that Grace and Jacques have married. Here, a black-and-white photograph of their kiss appears on screen which lacks the immediacy of on-screen narrative time and, arguably, serves to de-sexualize the scene. As Vivian Sobchak observes, there is a radical difference between 'the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema' (1994, p.83). The photograph does not really invite the spectator into the scene, Sobchak argues, though it may invite contemplation of the scene (1994, p.83).

Two Irish films, *Night Train* (1998) and *Tara Road* (2005), also include a mature female character passionately kissing on screen. In *Night Train*, Alice (Brenda Blethyn) falls in love with Michael Poole (John Hurt). Alice cares for her elderly, emotionally needy mother and Poole's sudden arrival in her life is a source of unexpected happiness and hope. However, the narrative does not explore the sexual nature of their relationship or her feelings about embarking on such a relationship for the first time, as a mature adult. While 'cinema is characterized by the relentless

sexualisation of the female body' (Weitz, 2010, p.30), Alice is effectively desexualized in a manner unlikely to befall a younger female protagonist. A combined total of seven British and Irish films from the corpus represent mature female characters kissing passionately but not engaging in any further sexual activity.

Five British films, *The Mother* (2003), *Being Julia* (2004), *Keeping Mum* (2005), *Ruby Blue* (2007) and *The Last Station* portray mature female characters engaging in sexual relations or include scenes that imply sexual relations have taken place, or are about to take place. In three of these films, *Being Julia*, *Ruby Blue* and *The Last Station*, the sexual act occurs off screen; the female character is represented pre-coitus or post-coitus and the mature female body remains concealed throughout. In *The Last Station*, Sofya (Helen Mirren) and Leo (Christopher Plummer) kiss passionately as they nestle into the double bed. The camera pulls back from the bedroom but the viewer can hear their raucous laughter, suggestive of imminent sexual intimacy. Thus, the observations of Sally Chivers, in the context of US cinema, are equally true in relation to a number of British films: 'North American society dictates that aged bodies should be covered up to allow for a comfortable distancing; they should be prevented from telling "stories of getting old"' (2003, p. xxvii).

*The Mother* offers the most graphic representation of mature female sexuality in all the films from this sample. Interestingly, May (Ann Reid) is one of the oldest protagonists in the combined total of sixteen British and Irish films. Indeed, Reid was sixty-eight years of age at the time of the film's release. May connects emotionally and physically with Darren, played by thirty-five year-old Daniel Craig, and the two become lovers. Further, neither the narrative nor the camera flinches from the portrayal of May's sexual relationship with Darren as I will discuss shortly. Similarly, in *Keeping Mum*, Gloria Goodfellow (Kristin Scott Thomas) is sexually frustrated in her marriage to her vicar husband, Walter (Rowan Atkinson). When efforts to seduce him fail, she embarks on an affair with her golf instructor, Lance (Patrick Swazye). They kiss passionately, but the narrative defers the need for the protagonist to undress or to engage in on-screen sex with Lance. Only when Walter comes to his senses and realizes that the sexual act is part of the beauty of God's creation, does the narrative sanction on-screen sex for the female protagonist. Although Gloria's body remains fully clothed, *Keeping Mum* differs from all other British films, except *The Mother*, in its willingness to represent a mature female character engaging in the sexual act.

Two Irish films *The Tiger's Tail* (2006) and *Come on Eileen* (2010) also portray mature female characters in sexual relationships. Similar to the examples discussed in relation to British film, in *Come on Eileen*, Eileen (Jackie Howe) is shown in bed, post-coitus, with her younger lover Bill (Stephen Taylor). In contrast, in *The Tiger's Tail*, a black comedy about the excesses of Celtic Tiger Ireland, Jane (Kim Cattrall) plays the sexually-frustrated wife of Liam (Brendan Gleeson) and bemoans the fact that Liam never touches her anymore, thus articulating her sexual needs. The plot revolves around the appearance of Liam's doppelganger, who is intent on exchanging his own pedestrian life for Liam's status, money and power.

The doppelganger forces himself sexually on Jane in an (initially) non-consensual sexual act, though Jane eventually succumbs with groans of pleasure that effectively undermine her sexual autonomy. Thus, a number of rape myths are perpetuated: 'no' actually means 'yes' and 'real' rape is carried out by strangers not men with whom women are intimate (Banyard, 2010, p. 175). Surprisingly, like most of the other films in this sample, the mature female body remains concealed from view; ironic, given that Kim Cattrall was at least partially nude many times in *Sex and the City*. Arguably, it was a creative choice since the focus of the scene, in dramatic terms, was the triumph of the doppelganger. However, given the scant representation of sexually active older women in Irish cinema, the decision may have been more ideologically driven.

A combined total of seven British and Irish films represent mature female characters engaging in sexual activity, other than a kiss, albeit pre- or post-coital, with the mature female body hidden from view. The manner in which the narrative affirms mature female sexuality is typically restrained, even in those films that offer the mature female libido a degree of narrative space, giving credence to Kathleen Woodward's observation that 'the older female body is significant only in its absence' (2006, p.162).

## **Sexual Gazes**

### **Sexual Gaze: Male**

Informed by the work of Laura Mulvey (2009/1989), Liesbet van Zoonen argues that 'a core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of women as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience' (1994, p.85). In this corpus, even in those films in which a mature female character is sexually active, there is an ambivalence about the sexualized display of the older female body. Three British films *The Mother*, *Calendar Girls* (2004) and *Keeping Mum* and three Irish films *Agnes Brown* (1999), *The Tiger's Tail* and *Come on Eileen* present the mature



female body as spectacle. However, the familiar desiring gaze characteristic of much contemporary cinema is, at best, extremely muted in these films.

In *Keeping Mum*, Walter watches Gloria prepare for bed but she moves off camera to remove her bra and re-emerges in her nightdress, thus ensuring her naked breasts are not on display. In *Calendar Girls*, Chris, played by Helen Mirren, galvanizes women from the Women's Institute (WI) to pose nude for a charity calendar. However, their bodies (in sepia-tinted stills) are strategically positioned behind screening objects such as fruit and vegetables, arguably suggesting a resistance to mature female nudity, even when such nudity is at the heart of the narrative. The use of sepia as a photographic device may work to create a soothing psychological distance for an audience unused to the public display of the mature female body. Indeed, sepia is regarded as 'flattering' to the subject and, as Angela Baker, one of the original WI women who posed nude for the 1999 calendar, commented: 'older women can look a bit funny in colour' (cited in Wilkes, 2009).

Concealing strategies are not deployed in *The Mother*. For instance, as May lies in bed with Darren, her breasts are fully exposed. Hence, unlike most of the British and Irish films of this period, *The Mother* does not reject the display of the sexualized, mature female body. This may be explained by the radical perspective of the screenwriter, Hanif Kureishi, who commented that it is important to look at the protagonist's body without shame: 'showing her not as grotesque, or beautiful, but as a person, a living thing' (Lim, 2003). Kureishi goes on to observe that the inspiration for *The Mother* was sparked by a remark made by his own mother, who doubted she would ever be touched again following the death of her husband, Kureishi's father. Hence, it could be argued that the author wrote the character of May as a conscious cultural intervention.

In the Irish film, *Agnes Brown*, Agnes (Angelica Huston) struggles to raise seven children alone in late 1960s working-class Dublin. Thinking her family is asleep, Agnes relaxes by listening to her favourite singer, Tom Jones, on the radio. Stripped to her undergarments (though her body is still concealed in a chaste nylon 'slip') she dances sensuously, swaying to the music. Agnes clutches a sweeping brush to her bosom, as if locked in embrace with a dance partner. The camera lingers on the movements of her body in its partially clothed silhouette, unlike most of the films in this corpus. Further, even though the arrival of one of her children ruptures the

moment, the narrative implies that Agnes is a woman who is still sexually aware. Despite the burden of poverty, widowhood and motherhood, Agnes remains capable of displaying sensuality and the camera does not sidestep capturing that moment.

In *A Tiger's Tail*, Liam's doppelgänger watches Jane brush her hair at her dressing table mirror as she prepares for bed, his gaze lingering on the exposed flesh of her back. Similarly Eileen, (Jackie Howe) in *Come on Eileen*, is an alcoholic who has recently started to drink again. The camera lingers briefly on her body as she undresses to her bra before collapsing. However, within the context of the narrative, this behaviour is linked to her intoxication and is thus desexualized. The audience is thus positioned to view her actions as grotesque, rather than sexual.

A combined total of six out of seventeen British and Irish films in this corpus present the mature female body as an object of the male gaze. However, the older female body is never fully naked even in films that articulate an active mature female sexuality. In only two films, *The Mother* and *Calendar Girls* are female breasts even partially on display. This, we must infer that the spectacle of the mature female body is commonly perceived to be undesirable (in every sense) and best omitted. Indeed, as if to illustrate that point, in four British films (the distinction does not arise in any of the Irish films) *Undertaking Betty*, *Being Julia*, *Keeping Mum* and *Irina Palm*, the portrayal of sexuality in mature female characters contrasts sharply with that of the younger female actors who appear in varying stages of undress, in sexy lingerie or embroiled in sexual activity.

For example, in *Undertaking Betty*, downtrodden Betty, played by Brenda Blethyn, plans to leave her loveless marriage and embark on a new life with childhood sweetheart, Boris (Alfred Molina). Despite her assertion that, 'it's never too late for anything, ever', a single kiss in the last moments of the film is the extent of Betty's represented sexuality. In contrast, Meredith (Naomi Watts, aged thirty four) romps in bed with Hugh, Betty's husband (Robert Pugh), clad in sexy lingerie, stockings and suspenders. Thus, the different treatment bestowed upon the younger and older female body would seem to support Elizabeth Markson's observation that the female cinematic sexual body 'remains young, pure and fecund for the male voyeuristic gaze' (2003, p. 91) even when the narrative acknowledges the sexuality of older women.

### **Sexual Gaze – Female**

In the context of this discussion, the female gaze relates to the objectification of the male body by the female character; an example of heterosexual female voyeurism, arguably increasingly apparent in popular culture (Attwood, 2011, p.205). In this corpus, the female gaze is exhibited in only four British films; *The Mother*, *Being Julia*, *Ladies in Lavender* (2004) and *Keeping Mum* and in one Irish film, *Agnes*

Brown. This resonates with Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer's observation that 'there is a female gaze but it is not as prevalent or as deeply rooted in our socio-cultural fabric. It remains the Other gaze and lacks the power of the male gaze' (2012, p.8).

In *The Mother*, May stops to gaze at Darren as he works bare-chested in the conservatory of her son's home. Similarly, Julia's eyes travel appreciatively over Tom's (Shaun Evans') body as he runs into the water in his swimming trunks just as Ursula, in *Ladies in Lavender*, fixes her gaze on Andrea (Daniel Bruhl) as he runs into the sea. In contrast, the audience is invited to gaze at Lance's athletic body from Gloria's voyeuristic point of view in *Keeping Mum* but only in a comedic sense. The desiring gaze is absent in the representation of Gloria's sexuality as Lance's body is framed as a source of humorous revulsion. The only Irish film to highlight the male body through the female gaze is *Agnes Brown*; the camera tracks Pierre (Arno Chevrier), the French baker, as he works and his muscular chest and arms are on display through his vest. Indeed, the young man is exoticized not only by his youth but by his Frenchness. Hence, a combined total of just six, out of the seventeen British and Irish films in my corpus, present the male body as an object of the (mature) female gaze.

### **Affirming Female Sexuality**

All the British and Irish films in this corpus affirm mature women as sexually active, or as sexual beings, even if they do not express their sexuality actively within the narrative. This is the case whether they are mothers, single women, midlife or older women, although Barbara's (Judi Dench's) narrative journey in *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) is problematic. While her sexuality is acknowledged by the narrative, lesbian sexual desire is represented as 'other'; dangerous and out of control as I will go on to discuss. While, as illustrated previously, the narrative may minimize the articulation of mature female sexuality, overall these films suggest that sexuality is a necessary and important part of life. Also in evidence is a direct challenge to those cultural norms which exclusively pair youth and sex and which: 'make middle-aged and older people ashamed of their sexual desires' (Carpenter et al., 2006, p. 95).

*Calendar Girls*, effectively gives licence to mature women to discover their sexuality through the public display of their bodies. Indeed, these women make peace with their own perceived imperfections: 'grey hair, cellulite, the lot'. The film poses a challenge to the sexual discourses that prize 'tits' in so-called 'lads mags' but is disgusted by the sight of mature female breasts. Elsewhere, an explicit sexual desire is articulated by Sofya in *The Last Station*. Feigning illness, she sends a message to her husband, Leo Tolstoy, to return home at once. Sofya awaits him in her double bed; her long hair is unpinned and tumbling over her bare shoulders: 'a release of inhibiting restraints, a sign of sexual readiness' (Brownmiller, 1984, p.61). Leo has

long since denounced sexual pleasure and is celibate, much to Sofya's chagrin. But she encourages him with gentle sexual teasing: 'Look at me, this is who I am [...] we may be older and maybe we're old but I'm still your little chicken and you're still my big cock. Come on, let me make you sing'.

Keeping Mum also acknowledges that women have sexual needs but suggests that these are best satisfied within marriage. Indeed, Gloria's plan to travel to Mexico with Lance is abandoned once Walter's sexual appetite returns. Similarly, in *Mamma Mia!*, Donna (Meryl Streep), is asked by her friend, Tanya (Christine Baranski) if she is 'getting any?'. If Donna is not sexually active, the inference is, she ought to be. Women and men of all ages need to remain sexually playful and, at the film's end, Donna is poised to fully express her sexuality. Indeed, Donna, Tanya, and Rosie (Julie Walters) are all in different ways, reawakened and invigorated when the opportunity for a sexual relationship presents itself. Early second wave feminism questioned marriage and monogamy as well as supporting sexual freedom; indeed it championed what Natasha Walter calls 'a defiant reclaiming of sexual pleasure' (2010, p. 86). However, in most mainstream cinema this only extends to the sexual activity of young women. As discussed, *The Last Station*, *Keeping Mum* and *Mamma Mia!* pose a significant challenge in this regard, validating, as they do, the sexual expression of mature women.

In the Irish film *Tara Road* the theme of affirming sexuality is present but does not emerge strongly in the narrative; Marilyn's sexuality is only expressed in a single passionate kiss to welcome her husband back into her life. Furthermore and as already noted, in *Come on Eileen* Eileen's sexuality is inextricably intertwined with her alcoholism. That said, her sexual relationship with Bill is accepted by her family without reproach and is problematized only when she starts to drink again. It is Eileen's relationship with alcohol rather than sex that challenges the security of her family. For instance, it is her return to drinking that prompts her son Jimmy (Felix Malcolm Still) to run away from home.

The value of sexual relations within these films is also affirmed through the articulation of loss and sadness. For instance, Julia is distraught to lose her lover, Tom, in *Being Julia*, the loss made more unbearable by his betrayal with a younger woman. This is because Tom's presence had injected passion into Julia's life 'when everything seemed so dull and unpromising'. The film concludes with Julia returning to a companionable marriage with her sexually unavailable husband; the status quo has been restored. Additionally, Julia discovers that her close friend and sometimes lover, Charles (Bruce Greenwood), is gay. At the film's end, Julia implicitly accepts that she can only rely on herself, going forward.

In *Ladies in Lavender*, Andreas, the young man with whom Ursula has fallen in love, leaves the home of Ursula and her sister Janet (Maggie Smith), in 1930s Cornwall. Rescued by the sisters from the sea and nursed back to health, Andreas eventually goes to London to embark on a career in music. Ursula's intense longing for the

younger man is represented in a scene in which she climbs into his empty bed, visually articulating the ache that cannot be expressed in words. Loss also haunts Grace Trevethyn in *Saving Grace*. This occurs when her husband suddenly dies leaving Grace, not only with his debts, but also with the knowledge that he had a mistress. However, Honey Chambers, played by Diana Quick, aged fifty-four years at the time of the film's release, does challenge the stereotype of the mistress as the 'younger model'. Honey is presented as glamorous and flirtatious, in contrast with the, initially, rather dowdy and earnest Grace. Nevertheless, the inclusion of an older 'other woman' is itself a challenge to dominant sexual discourses about the asexual nature of mature women. When Grace confronts Honey about the relationship with her dead husband, it emerges that Grace's sex life had metaphorically died long before her husband was literally dead: 'He thought you weren't interested', Honey tells her. 'Well,' Grace responds, 'he was wrong'.

A combined total of sixteen British and Irish films affirm mature women as sexually active, or as inherently sexual beings. Overall, the affirmation of the sexually active mature women is more muted in Irish than in British film. Historically, as Ruth Barton and others have suggested, urban and rural Irish society has been characterized by sexual repression, particularly in relation to female sexuality (2004, p.115). Indeed, the only Irish film that proactively explores the theme of midlife sexuality, *Night Train*, is extremely tentative in its representation of female, or indeed male, sexuality.

## **Sexual Agency**

While third-wave feminists reject 'the regulation of female sexuality' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 137) and the 'limitations on what is considered appropriate behavior for each gender' (Redfern and Aune, 2010, p. 50) the focus is principally on young women and their concerns; ageing femininity has been, more or less, overlooked. Interestingly, five British films *The Mother*, *Calendar Girls*, *Keeping Mum*, *Ruby Blue* and *The Last Station* and one Irish film, *Come on Eileen* are concerned with the sexual agency of ageing femininity and depict the mature female character as either initiating or co-initiating sexual activity

May, the protagonist in *The Mother*, is the most forthright of all the characters in terms of her sexual needs. For instance, she initiates the kiss with Darren and, later, she asks him to 'come to the spare room'. In *Keeping Mum*, we also see Gloria take the sexual initiative, albeit with a comedic twist. Stephanie, in *Ruby Blue* (Josiane Balasko), pursues Jack (Bob Hoskins) patiently and persistently. Yet she is sensitive to the fact that he has been recently widowed. Eventually, as they lie in bed following (off-screen) sex, she reveals that she is transsexual, a revelation that temporarily fractures the relationship. The subsequent dramatic conflict relates to Jack's revulsion at engaging in a sexual act with a transsexual, rather than a mature woman. Arguably, the narrative does not shy away from engaging with mature

female sexuality but the dramatic focus on Stephanie's transsexuality could be seen as a distraction from the former, similar to the role played by alcohol in *Come on Eileen*.

A further example of proactive female sexuality is demonstrated by Chris (Helen Mirren) in *Calendar Girls*, who is the driving force behind the nude calendar initiative. The film's interdiegetic action is prompted by the sudden eruption of midlife sexuality and we see the character embrace the opportunity for exhibitionism and adventure presented by modelling for the calendar. However, Chris becomes captivated by the media attention, resulting in the neglect of her friend Annie (Julie Walters) and family. Although played with a light comic touch, mature female sexuality is represented as potentially destabilizing. We learn that Chris is at 'a difficult age', implying she is menopausal and liable to behave erratically. Ultimately, a conservative message underpins the narrative, Chris is reined back into family life as wife and mother, and her sexuality is once again under control.

In *The Last Station*, Sofya toys with her husband's sexuality. Her laughter conveys unbridled lust as she claps her hands in delight and revels in 'talking dirty' and tempting the chaste Tolstoy into her bed. 'I want you to love me', she tells him, and they kiss passionately. A drunken Eileen, in *Come on Eileen*, is equally sexually forthright as she starts to undress and gyrate, suggesting to her boyfriend, Bill, that they forget their argument and 'have it off'. However, Bill rejects her advances and goes home, repulsed by her excessive drinking.

A combined total of six British and Irish films from the period 1998-2011 portray mature female characters exhibiting sexual agency with very few negative consequences for the protagonists concerned. By the end of the film *The Mother*, May is on her own again but profoundly altered by her experience. As she packs her art supplies and her new clothes, we know she is embarking on a different phase of her life, rather than running away. While Chris in *Calendar Girls* is rather more conservatively depicted as 'coming to her senses' she is accepted back into her family and suffers no punishment in a narrative sense.

Similarly, Sofya (*The Last Station*) eventually loses her husband, who leaves the marital home because he cannot cope with her passionate outbursts. Nonetheless, a short time later on his deathbed, he asks for his wife, suggesting that he values her outspokenness and her passion. In the same way, Eileen (*Come on Eileen*) stops drinking and acknowledges that Bill was a good friend who made her face some harsh truths; the peace she ultimately experiences emanates from an acceptance that she cannot allow drink back into her life. Hence, we can, I think, positively conclude that most of the female characters who demonstrate sexual agency do not pay a price, narratively, for articulating, demonstrating and pursuing their desire, though, arguably, only in *The Mother*, is this message not circumscribed in some way.

This may suggest the emergence of new discourses about mature female sexuality which posit a welcome and significant challenge to Catherine Redfern's and Kristin Aune's assertion that 'acting upon desires can bring opprobrium on women to which men are rarely subject' (2010, p. 53). Such opprobrium is magnified in the case of the expression of mature female sexuality and, specifically, the expression of maternal sexuality (Varis, 2009; Montemurro and Siefken, 2012). Indeed, as Rosalind Gill observes (2007, p. 152), despite the growing sexualization of western culture 'only some women are constructed as active, desiring sexual subjects' and this does not typically include ageing women.

### **Sexual Boundaries**

Two British films, *Keeping Mum* and *Being Julia*, represent women who seek sexual satisfaction in extra-marital relationships and ultimately suffer humiliation and betrayal. In the case of *Being Julia*, the younger man rejects Julia for a younger woman and she returns to her husband and a 'modern' marriage in which there is companionship, admiration and support, though not sexual passion or fidelity. The implication is that it is fortunate both characters have a loving family they can return to; and there are real dangers for women who stray from the matrimonial bed. That said, in *Undertaking Betty*, Betty, played by Brenda Blethyn, conceives a bizarre and comic plot to feign her death and run away from her husband with childhood sweetheart, Boris (Alfred Molina). Betty and Boris find happiness far away from their Welsh village and from Betty's confining and loveless marriage. However, this musical fantasy genre may render such escapades (by mature women, who should know better) more acceptable to an audience than if it were played as straight drama.

By contrast, Hollywood has traditionally sanctioned romantic relationships between older men and younger women. This brings to mind Susan Sontag's concept of the 'sexual disqualification' of ageing women whereby women's 'sexual value' and attractiveness 'drops' with age (Sontag, cited in Varis, 2009, p.512). Men, on the other hand, remain 'sexually eligible' into old age. Interestingly, and resonating with Sontag's observations, the male participants in Varis's audience response study to *The Mother* did not question their own sexual eligibility for women fourteen to twenty years younger than themselves. Unusually, then, four British films, *Saving Grace*, *The Mother*, *Being Julia*, *Ladies in Lavender* and two Irish films, *Agnes Brown* and *Come on Eileen* challenge this ostensible norm by pairing an older woman with a younger man; defined here as a male actor at least seven years younger than the mature female character.

Addressing the above point, in *Saving Grace*, there is no reference to an age difference between Jacques Chevalier and Grace Trevethan in the narrative.

However, the actor, Tcheky Karyo, is seven years younger than Brenda Blethyn, thus bucking the trend identified by Doris Bazzini (Bazzini et al., 1997).

The age difference between May and Darren in *The Mother* is not problematized by either of these two characters. However, May's children, Paula and Bobby (Steven Mackintosh) do voice their disgust at their mother's active sexuality, primarily because Darren is a much younger man. Yet Paula is happy to introduce her mother to Bruce, a widower nearer her own age. Bruce, played by Oliver Ford Davies, was sixty-four years old at the time of the film's release. The resulting sexual encounter is distasteful to May and in stark contrast to her sexual experience with Darren. Thus, while youth is still privileged in that Bruce is older than Darren, in this film it is at the expense of the older man, rather than the older woman. May indicates that she will pay for Darren to travel the world with her, but never professes, or seeks, a declaration of love or intent because, for May, this is a relationship based on friendship and sexual desire. Indeed, May's position could be interpreted as a reversal of the 'Sugar Daddy' stereotype in which an older man offers financial incentives to a, usually, much younger woman, in exchange for sexual favours.

By contrast, *Being Julia* offers a cautionary note to older women thinking of engaging sexually with younger men. Julia falls in love with Tom Fennel although he betrays her for a young starlet, Avice (Lucy Punch), and later cruelly denies his sexual involvement with Julia, declaring 'she's old enough to be my mother.' Furthermore, when Julia tells her friend Charles (Bruce Greenwood) that she is considering doing a play about an older woman and a younger man, he assumes the play will be a farce: 'Everyone laughs at the older woman' he warns, registering social assumptions about the bias against such a union.

Alternatively, in *Agnes Brown*, Agnes is asked out on a date by Pierre and an age difference, while implied, is never referenced in the narrative.<sup>9</sup> However, Agnes's perceived role as a mother takes precedence over a sexual relationship. Similarly in *Come on Eileen*, the narrative does reference the age difference between Eileen and Bill. This is highlighted when Gipsy (Mercedes Grower) Eileen's daughter, jokes that her mother 'nabbed the only young one' from the cricket club and Bill playfully refers to Eileen as 'the old girl'. The narrative implies that, in this context, her insecurity has no substance in reality, but can be explained with reference to mature women internalising a cultural fear and disgust about ageing (Cruikshank, 2003, p.153). Further, Eileen's fears can be explained with reference to Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony (Bocock, 1986). What it means to be a mature woman or a mother, for instance, often appears self-evident and rooted in common sense. Middle-aged women have not traditionally been encouraged to define themselves as sexual beings and can internalize the assumptions of a (patriarchal) culture.

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<sup>9</sup> The date of birth for actor Arno Chevrier is unavailable but Pierre is positioned as a younger man within the narrative.



A combined total of six out of seventeen British and Irish films include a female character who is younger than the male romantic interest, whether this is referenced in the narrative or not. However, only one of these non-traditional relationships survives; a commentary, perhaps, on perceived cultural expectations. That said, five of the six female characters do experience something positive as a result of their relationship. May (*The Mother*) rediscovers a curiosity about life as result of meeting Darren and is reawakened sexually; Julia (*Being Julia*) takes revenge on Tom by upstaging her younger rival, Avice, by triumphantly delivering a powerful tour-de-force. And Agnes, in *Agnes Brown*, is reminded that there is love and romance in the world, even if she chooses not to experience it. Less happily, it could be said that Julia suffers the imposed loss of sexual passion and is ultimately 'alone' despite remaining in a companionable marriage. In *Ladies in Lavender* Ursula's emotional arc is not satisfactorily explored and the narrative concludes with little indication of how the experience has impacted on her interior world or how it will shape the rest of her life.

### **Sexual Being**

Two British films, *Ladies in Lavender* and *Notes on a Scandal* depict a mature female character experiencing sexual desire but unable to consummate that desire. Within these films, neither Ursula nor Barbara, both played by Judi Dench, engage in overt sexual activity. *Ladies in Lavender* is set in Cornwall, 'the passionate periphery' (Westland cited in Moseley, 2010, p.78). The protagonist, Ursula, implies she has never had a sexual relationship, yet in her dreams, a young Ursula rolls in the grass with Andreas, the young man she has helped rescue from the sea. Like Sofya in *The Last Station*, Ursula's yearning is also articulated by the releasing of her long, unruly hair; a gesture that is culturally interpreted in the West as the action of a temptress (Weitz, 2004, p.4). Furthermore, the act of unpinning and shaking loose a cascade of long hair is more often associated in cinema with young, sexually available, women. However, the only sexual expression open to Ursula, given the cultural constraints on older female sexuality, is touching the boy's hair and face as he sleeps.

In *Notes on a Scandal*, Barbara's longing for Sheeba is palpable within the fleeting glances and carefully measured voice-over but her lesbian sexuality is represented as thwarted and perverse, reminiscent of 'the monstrous feminine' described by Barbara Creed in relation to the horror film genre (1993, pp. 154-155). Barbara's sexual yearning is implied in the desiring gaze directed at Sheeba's body as she dances uninhibitedly. Later, Barbara tells Sheeba that when she was a girl, they used to 'stroke each other' when a friend 'was a bit down'. Ignoring Sheeba's reluctance, Barbara runs her hands over the younger woman's arm and Sheeba recoils.

At the end of the film, without any analysis of her repressed needs, Barbara is doomed to repeat the same patterns over again. Ultimately, the narrative does not offer either Ursula or Barbara the opportunity to reflect and grow from their experience. Yet *Ladies in Lavender*, *Notes on a Scandal* and *The Last Station* are subversive in their acknowledgement that older women do have sexual feelings. Age does not obliterate sexual desire; however much it may limit the articulation of that desire because of the internalization of 'societal messages, myths and norms about aging women's sexuality' (Browne, 1999, p.40).

## **Maternal Sexuality**

Dafna Leamish and Varda Muhlbauer argue that the marginalisation of older women by gender and age is linked to the dominant dichotomy in representations of women in patriarchal culture; the 'Madonna' and the 'whore' (2012, p. 169). As the Madonna, women are the selfless mothers, the nurturers and care-givers. As the whore, they are the sex objects, at once desirous and threatening to men. 'Motherhood is perceived as asexual and sexy women are rarely portrayed as mothers. Hence, femininity is defined primarily by these two roles; exactly the same two roles presumed to be lost by older women' (Leamish and Muhlbauer, 2012, p. 169).

Tally's research on American cinema has uncovered a number of recent films that partially break the representational mould and present us with characters who are mothers and sexual beings (2006, p.52). A similar annexing of motherhood and sexuality emerges in a small handful of British and Irish films produced between 1998 and 2011. For example, in *Keeping Mum* and *Mamma Mia!* the daughters of the protagonists, Holly and Sophie, (Tamsin Egerton and Amanda Seyfried, respectively), do not balk when they make discoveries about their mother's sexual life. In *Mamma Mia!*, it is Sophie's mother, Donna, who is concerned that she will appear sexually permissive to her child, though this is never an issue for Sophie. Moreover, by the end of the film, Donna marries one of Sophie's possible fathers (Pierce Brosnan) and is poised to embark on another sexual relationship suggesting the compatibility of sexuality and motherhood.

However, in the Irish film *Agnes Brown*, Agnes is defined as a mother first and foremost. The sexually vibrant woman who is buried within her is acknowledged not only in the sensuous dance discussed previously but in the humorous but sexually frank conversation with her friend Marion (Marion O'Dwyer). Agnes suggests that 'organisms' do not actually exist but Marion assures her that they do and that she herself has experienced them on two occasions. Agnes muses that she has seven children 'and not an organism to show for it'. However, an active sexual life would threaten the stability of her family and must be kept in check, suggestive of Tally's work on 'toxic' motherhood (2008, p.130).

A sexual relationship with Pierre is rejected and friendship is all that Agnes is prepared to offer him. Her role as a mother must take priority. Thus she tells Pierre: 'All I have now is me kids. I have to make sure they grow up right'. Social expectations regarding the role of the mother have been internalized by Agnes and her sexual desire usurped, echoing Beth Montemurro's and Jenna Marie Siefken's (2012, p.2) observation that when a woman has children she must primarily act as an example and be responsible and conservative in a culturally specific way. For instance, in an Irish context, traditionally, the mother figure has been 'devoted and asexual, her own desires subsumed into the maternal' (Barton, 2004, p.114).

## **Conclusion**

Weitz suggests that 'foreign films have the reputation of portraying midlife female sexuality more positively than US films' (2010, p. 21) and calls for further research to determine 'whether this reputation is justified' (p.21). The analysis of British and Irish film narratives did indeed uncover a number of striking similarities on both sides of the Atlantic suggesting, perhaps, an unconscious resistance to representing the sexuality of older women, a resistance that may be partially understood by applying Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject (1982, p.4). In accordance with Weitz's findings, a small number of British and Irish films offer mature female sexuality conditional support, within certain parameters. With one exception, marriage or romantic love is implicitly identified as the appropriate forum for a mature character to express her sexuality. The representation of active mature female sexuality is restrained and, in many cases, limited to a kiss. Moreover, even if mature female characters are depicted as sexually active, the mature female body is usually hidden from view.

As with Weitz's findings, a number of older women have relationships with younger men, though they are inevitably short-lived. The mature female characters in US, British and Irish film are white, middle-class and slim (though not 'fashionably' thin). Similarly, many films which feature sexually active mature female characters have a comedic thrust, such as the Irish film *Agnes Brown*. Indeed five British films are comedies and another film, *Irina Palm*, arguably a straight drama, was marketed as a comedy, perhaps suggesting that mature female sexuality may be more palatable when couched in comedic terms. That said, there is a greater emotional range across the British and Irish films and, unlike the US sample, the majority have a female protagonist driving the narrative.

Overall, the films in my corpus affirm the sexuality of midlife and older women (including maternal sexuality) and validate the sexual pleasure and sexual agency of mature female characters over forty-five years of age. While there is still evidence of a 'narrower range of behaviour considered cinematically appropriate for ageing women' (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p.157), a small number of British and Irish films

are challenging hegemonic definitions of older women as asexual. These more progressive narratives are important because, when mature female sexuality is absent from the screen, it can make a powerful statement, naturalizing the invisibility of older women's sexuality and even rendering it taboo. Lauzen and Dozier suggest that 'the worth' of characters is symbolically communicated by their absence or abundance on screen and by the quality of their portrayals (2005, p. 438). The marginalization of mature women in film has widely been accepted as inevitable, explained away as being part and parcel of the demands of commercial cinema; 'just the way it is'.

Kim Kjaersgaard suggests that people need 'rich images of diverse possibilities from which to imagine and weave their own tapestry of life' (2003, p.208). Certainly, we need new narratives of ageing; new stories of vibrant, sexually active mature female protagonists if we are to mine the rich possibilities of our long and complex lives. A small but consistent stream of British and Irish films are providing a limited ideological challenge to the hegemonic representation of mature women as asexual; films in which mature women can have sexual desires, can act on those desires, can forge sexual relations with younger men and remain sexually vibrant through their lives. While acknowledging that all sexual behaviour is framed within patriarchal parameters, these narratives are important and significant because they challenge the binary that sexual passion belongs to the young and celibacy is the inevitable gateway to old age.

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