Illuminating Times: Age and Disability

Sally Chivers (2011). *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*. University of Toronto Press. ISBN 978-4426-1104-7

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Sally Chivers's (2011) *The Silvering Screen: Old Age in Disability and Cinema* published by University of Toronto Press makes a significant contribution to current understandings of population aging. This book has great value as a teaching resource for courses in film studies, cultural studies, women and gender studies, disability studies, family studies, gerontology, sociology, and social policy. Chivers uses an intersectional approach to trace the binary logic that underpins fleshly inscriptions of disability, race, class, and gender on the body (in/)visible and that makes it possible to reduce and contain all the vicissitudes of old age in an image of a wrinkle. She artfully exposes the sexist, sanist, ableist, and racist dimensions of an unequal system of rewards and punishments related to the successful performance of old age, whether the actor is "in character," "behind the scenes," or "off screen." The book includes a filmography and movie review, in addition to tools for rethinking what is involved and at stake in the performance of old age within a context framed by cultural anxieties about global population aging.

Chivers's book takes up and embodies Bill Hughes's (2000) "challenge to the aesthetic of oppression" which he describes as "also a challenge to medicine and the medical model of disability" (p. 557). She accomplishes this by critiquing assumptions that disability and age are "entirely medical" (14), by explicating "the thorny relationship between the pathologization of age and the pathologization of disability" (15), and by drawing attention to the role that the figure of the older actor plays in perpetuating social marginalization and rationalizing death under the auspices of making space for progress. Taking up De Beauvoir's (1970) invitation in *The Coming of Age* to consider how "what a culture says about age says even more about the culture," Chivers explores the centrality of declarations of fitness in shaping how age is made visible as a fictional performance and condition of authenticity. She critically examines the material effects of backstage assumptions about "the aging actor" on performers' actually lived lives and shows how in North American films the personal, social, and political significance of advancing age is routinely reduced to an occasion to reaffirm the legitimacy of hierarchical and oppressive social orders.

Her analysis yields insights regarding the role of age in a visual economy of difference, and expands awareness of age as a condition of possibility for a scientific discourse and mode of policing bodily difference, with particular emphasis on disability, gender, and race. Sexuality is discussed in detail across multiple chapters, but three films that depict heteronormative couplings and intimacies are privileged. While the book is

impressively comprehensive in scope, the analysis would have benefited from greater attention to the operation of images of the older adult in the cultural production and regulation of sexual alterity. Further, her argument would have been strengthened by greater engagement with the socio-political and historical conditions central to the emergence of the figure of old age.

Anxieties about the aging of boomer cohorts express a fundamental ambivalence about the realities and successful realization of post-war foreign and domestic reconstruction projects. Images of aging function as precipice and symbolic reminder of the precarity of embodied being in the post-World War II world. Against the backdrop of a moral imperative to look, be, feel, and become "fit," age appears not only as a question of prolonged life, but a screen that projects an understanding of history as the inevitable outcome of a series of choices. The production and performance of age provides for a dichotomized understanding of the future as a realization of promise or peril. *The Silvering Screen* reveals how normative understandings of age and aging organize a turning back toward the past under the aegis of a yet unfulfilled future. As Chivers says, the silver screen reflects a "marked and heightened awareness of time passing" as well as "an increasing alarm about the 'greying' of the population because of the perceived age and size of what has been labeled the baby boomer generation" (xvi). Within apocalyptic aging scenarios, a grey tsunami of older adults threatens to overwhelm and destroy national and international economic stability and individual wellbeing. The sustainability of welfare state models, and questions about whether it is the role of the state or the family to provide care, offer animating themes within discourses of population aging (Uhlenberg, 2013).

Although population aging is represented as a global problem, the extent and implications of population aging vary depending on the society, and population aging is most visible within Western nations (Uhlenberg, 2013). Despite the existence of evidence-based research that population aging will not have a significant impact on economic growth, the prevailing attitude remains that, "This large group of elderly persons is expected to consume substantially more than it contributes and thereby to alter the income trajectories that people and nations have come to expect" (Bloom, Canning, & Fink, 2010, pp. 233-234). Population aging is the valence issue and major problem that it is precisely because of *who* is aging: the baby boomer cohort, a historically and geopolitically distinct population that privileged from the benefits of post-war government subsidies, social programs and services. It is therefore fitting that Chivers focuses on popular North American films that include, represent, or reflect the perspectives of this cohort, whether directly or as cultural influences in their lives. Where this generation was once represented as holding the key to a new order in the aftermath of a world weathered by war, baby boomers are once again charged with the responsibility for the fate of the world. This time the "opportunity" for renewal that they represent can only be achieved by undoing the welfare state models introduced in their name and putting in their place new regimes of neoliberal privatization. As she says,

> This book is focused on a privileged subset of the world's population in that it discusses those who not only hope to age but also have the luxurious freedom

> to fear growing old because of what will diminish from their previously rich lives. Gerontology is not particularly interesting or relevant to those who do not expect and are not expected to live long (10).

An examination of images of aging provides insights concerning internal divisions within the supposedly unifying concept of the "person," and how particular types of persons can be (re)marked as having failed to reach maturity. According to Taylor (1985) a "person" is a self-interpreting animal. But what does self-interpretation mean within settings dominated by conventional wisdom about the meaning of age and aging? *The Silvering Screen* illustrates how being and becoming a person are tasks that have different meanings and implications depending on ascribed and assigned gender roles and status positions. The author critically explores the gendered dimensions of aging ideologies and ideals of eternal youth through contrasting characters (fictional as well as the actors that play them) in films that are part of the popular imaginary.

In Chapter One "Same Difference? Gerontology and Disability Studies Join Hands" Chivers describes the intimate relationship between disability and aging; a relationship which, much like the cinematic and off-screen marriages she analyzes, is troubled by tensions produced by unexamined expectations, moments of anxiety, separation, and avoidance. This chapter lays the theoretical framework and methodological orientations of the book and explicates the linkages and points of contention between disability studies and social gerontological perspectives. Her articulation of this orientation testifies to her embodied experience of making her way through a world that imagines older adults and disabled persons as "in the way."

This theoretically rich exploration of cinematic images of aging and the narrative problem the figure of the older actor introduces and resolves has practical implications and thus will be of interest to a social policy perspective. For example, she observes, "As the population ages and many people acquire disabilities, new forms of accessibility are likely to emerge, and these ought to make space for both seniors and people with disabilities" (9). However, Chivers also suggests that in the current moment the meaning and materiality of "a space for both seniors and people with disabilities" will be informed by a culture of youthism and "compulsory youthfulness" (12) and the expectation that, "the most successful way to age is to appear not to age at all" (10). In this chapter she asks what it would mean to "face age" (14) in a culture that prizes interventions that can facilitate the erasure of visible markers of aging. She also considers the limitations of discourses of the Temporarily Abled Body (TAB) that attempt to normalize disability through the assumption that that if people live long enough anyone could become disabled. She asks, "Does a person with a disability simply become more natural and normative as [s/]he ages? Or does [s/]he just disappear from the statistical and cultural registrar?" (20).

Chapter Two, "Baby Jane Grew Up: The Horror of Aging in Mid-Twentieth-Century Hollywood," examines the conditions of being cast as "dysfunctional" through an analysis of the lives and works of three Hollywood actresses. This chapter is interesting in its attention to the relations between gender, disability, and age, and specifically,

"how Hollywood uses the aging frame to promote one meaning of aging femininity as horrifyingly disabled and to obscure other interpretations" (39). Chivers draws from Mary Russo's (1999) conception of the scandal of anachronism and includes a consideration of the work involved in acting one's age and the pathologization of people act against their age and transgress normative understandings of what is "age appropriate."

The film analyses in Chapter Three, "Grey Matters: Dementia, Cognitive Difference, and the 'Guilty Demographic' on Screen," consider the distinction between aging with a disability and aging without a disability. This chapter dwells more explicitly on cultural representations of the promises and perils of an aging population through a focus on films that feature characters living with cognitive impairment as a result of Alzheimer's disease and/or other dementias, conditions she suggests are treated as synonymous with aging itself. Some of the dominant tropes that emerge in these films include a loss of self, and with it, a loss of the "real" from which there can be no recovery, and for which there is no cure, no return to normalcy, only death. These tropes are significant in what they accomplish—a reflection on past life experiences in an attempt to rationalize the irrationality of the present. Paradoxically, the value of life is affirmed through the pathologization of its present, and the anticipation of disappearance.

Chapters Four, Five, and Six explore the how age, disability, sexuality, masculinity, and race are visualized within the context of significant relations such as marriage, work, leadership, and friendship, and how these relations are organized by cultural mythologies of the American Dream. Representations of successful aging reveal and resolve the problem of the burden of dependency through the heroic acts of individuals who, despite age and disability, continue to mobilize white male privilege. The Conclusion provides a useful summary of key issues discussed throughout the book from a more explicit political economy perspective and closes with the caution that the greater presence of older actors in contemporary films does not necessarily reflect a greater social concern for older adults and rather contributes to systems of disadvantage for the most marginalized people within our aging population.

The Silvering Screen offers a cogent, moving, and poetic analysis of the relationship between aging and disability that refuses to conflate the two or reduce one to the other. This book is well organized, theoretically rigorous, and accessible to readers pursuing undergraduate and/or graduate degrees in the social sciences and humanities, and would make a welcome addition to health professions' curricula.

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