



Charlotte Christina Fink

Spinsters Reloaded

Single Older Women
in American Popular Culture



PETER LANG

This study entails a qualitative cultural film analysis of single women characters in six contemporary US-American movies released between 1999 and 2008. On the one hand, the focal point is the assessment of character portrayals and their embedding into their everyday lives. On the other, it focuses on the correlation between age, gender, and marital status. Results show that an acknowledgement of different kinds of single older women seems prevalent, yet also reveal a dominance of hetero-normativity. It is concluded that Hollywood offers a so called counter world of single women and aging, particularly with regard to socio-economic strains, health, and an active aging process where one can look 'younger'.

Charlotte Christina Fink, born and raised in Austria, has been educated in the fields of Sociology and English as well as Media and American Cultural Studies. She was a Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant in the year 2005-2006, and an adjunct lecturer at The City College of New York from 2008 to 2011. Currently, she is an independent scholar situated in her hometown of Graz.

Spinsters Reloaded

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Cinderella - A Poem:

I don't know, if it were me,
I'd have gone back for that shoe.

Veronica, age 5¹

1 As quoted in Mapes, D. ed. *Single State of the Union*.

Preface and Acknowledgments

A few years back, while browsing through new arrivals at a Barnes & Noble book store in New York City, I came across *B is for Botox. An Alphabet Book for the Middle-Aged* by Ross and Kathryn Petras, published in 2009. Skimming the book which appeared to be a humorous gift set regarding middle age and aging (thus also presented in the tradition of small children's books with its thick pages, and a colorful and picture-based design), I was puzzled. "G is for going gray. Glenda was going gray. Now Glenda is going red. Tomorrow Glenda may be going black. Middle age is a wonderful time to learn all about colors!" it said, making a reference to Glee's falling apples as it was stated that G also stands for gravity. Going through all letters of the alleged aging-alphabet, I suddenly came to realize to what enormous extent aging (the process) and the aging (the people) have not only become a vital element of the economy, but in fact have become a product themselves. An aging baby boom generation surely seems inevitably precious to the infotainment industry and business-oriented society of today.

This experience also showed me, however, the value of this project. If the role ascriptions and references in the book stem from a common socio-cultural basis of knowledge regarding age and aging, what is their significance and what do they mean? Specifically, as a growing demographic, how are single women in their second half of life depicted, what is the general cultural frame of reference? Frankly, while numerous movies and television series have surfaced that feature older women characters, and pick aging and an aging person's life as a theme, this does not reveal information concerning the quality or else message of these depictions. Likewise, the question of who accounts for being older and who does not, as well as who is considered old (as opposed to older) is rarely addressed within the analysis of popular culture. While news regarding an alleged redefinition of attitudes towards and representations of attractiveness and age or aging for example have been running through the media, this project was meant to be a critical assessment thereof from the very beginning. Just like Veronica would have gone back for that shoe, more and more women in fact do; so why are endings consistently about Cinderellas who do not? Analyzing contexts and reasons for fairy-tale like endings throughout American popular film was thus another core interest.

Throughout the composition process, I had the support of many whose discussions and suggestions I am very grateful for. I particularly would like to thank my friends and family; you held my hand all along this lengthy and often intense process, and I do thank you for that and I appreciate your understanding for me being socially absent every so often. Most notably, I would like to thank my parents who I owe my passion for socio-cultural matters, education, and

knowledge to. It is because of you that I have been able to explore and discover what there is so easily, and for that I will forever be grateful for. Last but not least – Belen: Your words have been in my head the entire time; if it had not been for those, I would not have thought about nor had the initial motivation to work on this project. I am extremely thankful for what you have instilled and helped develop in me, and am therefore dedicating this paper to you and all Belen-like beings out there.

May 2012

Charlotte Christina Fink

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Introduction

Fueled by the second wave of the American women's movement in the late 1960s, numerous studies about the depictions of women as well as images of age and aged persons in the media began to appear on the academic scene of the 1970s and early 1980s (amongst others, by Fox and Renas; Gerbner et al.; McArthur and Resko; Tuchman). Both the American media as well as the American film industry came under fire for generally utilizing and propagating gender stereotypes. Scientists and researchers alike criticized women's underrepresentation and also stereotypical portrayals in the media. If they were present or else represented, their portrayals were dominated and shaped by cut and dried opinions and clichés which did not aim at reflecting societal patterns at all. Later research and empirical studies (see Signorielli 1989; Davis; Craig) were also predominantly conducted centering on a female point of view. In other words it was the representation of women and the alleged under representation as opposed to men's (over representation) that was the studies' starting point and the issue they were in fact most concerned with.

Former as well as recent studies certainly provide a good-to-know first insight into the American media and understanding its basic principles and premises of how men and women, but also various age groups, are depicted. The majority of studies show an invalid comparison of perception of men and women however in the sense that there has not been a lot of research concerning the portrayals of women alone; in particular research concerned with media portrayals of single older women. Even though factors such as marital status and age have actually been included in regular studies, and even though there are several studies and projects that deal with the presence and portrayal of older women on television for instance, there are not many studies available that have actually combined the person's gender with the variables of age and marital status within one study. A particular focus on this specific group of people, namely single older women, is therefore the basis for this dissertation at the crossroads of American Cultural, Age, and Gender Studies.

Spinsters reloaded – Single Older Women in American Popular Culture is hence supposed to be a cultural assessment and illustration of the characters of single older women and their designated lives and, more specifically, designated roles in American popular culture. As it implies, the prevailing notion of spinsters in relation to single women and age in society and culture will be at the center of attention. The focus will thus be on how culture sees and thinks about single older women as conveyed in cinematic depictions thereof. Portrayals and depictions in films and the language (of film) used to describe single older

women are considered methods to gain insight into these socio-cultural connotations of single older women. The main objective of the dissertation has been to point attention to, dive into and critically explore and analyze the representations and characterizations of older single women in American film and how they relate to a so called 'reloading' of the spinster term. The general assumption hereby has been that age functions as a significant socio-cultural marker, thus the perception of age is seen as framed and characterized by the individual woman's socio-cultural environment and context she is surrounded by.² The question of what the lives of single older women are culturally characterized by is consequently at the center of interest. Based on investigating cultural representations and getting back to or in that sense 'reloading' the (associations with and depiction of the) spinster herself, this dissertation also seeks to challenge and at the same time critique a suggested (re)definition of the spinster term, i.e. 'reload' the term spinster itself too. Put into the context of American popular culture, this study wants to investigate how older single women are represented and portrayed. In other words, what do the depictions of single older women in film entail, what are they characterized by and portrayed as? To what extent are issues of age, marital status, attractiveness or sexuality addressed? Are there specific (recurring) characteristics, roles or themes used to represent older single women in American popular culture? What is the socio-cultural setting or framework like that older single women are generally represented as being part of? So the basic question is what the connotations of being female, old, and single within the American frame of reference are, and what these representations tell us about the culture which they are part of.

How people are or else a certain population group is represented in the media helps understand the underlying mechanisms involved in the cultural construction of these people's and this group's identity as well as of role

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- 2 The term socio-cultural hereby refers to and acknowledges the combination, or else, involvement of both social and cultural factors and issues. Human society is considered being made up by and based on culture and social structure. While culture comprises general knowledge and a generally shared belief and idea system that is passed on from one generational context to another, social structure refers to this society's system of rules, roles, and statuses as well as social interactions and social relations (such as family structures and relations for instance). Cultural norms and standards *de facto* shape and affect social status and interaction, in other words social structures come to be because societies with particular cultural contexts construct specific social patterns or structures to organize these cultures with specific ideas, beliefs, and values. In turn, social structures and laws in order to cope with cultural changes (such as in relation to marriage, age of maturity, cultural diversity, etc.), since culture as such is not fixed but is subject to constant change (see Drislane & Parkinson. Online Dictionary of the Social Sciences).

ascriptions and role definitions. Several studies have shown that due to the increasing importance of television and other media in the enculturation and socialization process for instance, children and teenagers get most of their information about older people in general from the media (see Vasil and Wass; Holladay). Research regarding cultural stereotypes also emphasizes the fact that viewers are not passive observers of media portrayals and depictions of characters, but actively involved, and suggests a connection between the exposure to stereotypic and non-stereotypic portrayals alike and the judging of unrelated individuals and events (Murphy). Films, however, are not just merely a mirror of socio-cultural images and perceptions, but they moreover actually create them, contributing to a generally acknowledged structure of knowledge. The ultimate question is, then, “what constructs the ‘knowledge’ and what meanings are attached to the various components of that shared information?” (Stoddard 8). How women are viewed is also due to the worldwide dominance of Hollywood film portrayals in both television and movie theaters in many parts of the world for instance (Simonton). Eventually, understanding, reporting, and bringing to mind those mechanisms may instill a possible reorientation in thinking, behavior, and ultimately even socio-political action regarding the discrimination of men and women because of gender or age.

The following dissertation consists of three parts. Part I is dedicated to giving and discussing background information on socio-historical and cultural concepts and approaches to single women and age in American culture; age and gender portrayals in the American media; and the relationship between the study of film and (American) cultural studies. Part II first introduces the methodology of this study and summarizes the deployed films’ plots, and comprises discussions of the films according to an analysis perspective based on themes and roles respectively. Finally, Part III features the discussion of the results as demonstrated in Part II, how they correspond to concepts of single women and age as stated in Part I, as well as a conclusion and abstract.

Part I

1. What it means to be older: In search of a definition

1.1. Socio-Historical and Cultural Aspects of Age and Aging

According to the United Nations Report on the world's population of 2007, apart from a general population increase from currently 6.7 billion to an estimated 9.2 billion people in 2050, disproportionate as well as unprecedented aging dominates world population prospect (ibid). Half of the world's population growth has to be blamed on aging and the general rise of persons age 60 and older; worldwide median age rose from 58 years in the 1970s to 67 years of today and will continue to rise to 75 years by the middle of this century. Life expectancy is also expected to significantly rise in developed, less developed, and least developed countries alike. Additionally, while the number of people aged 60 or higher is expected to triple by 2050, the number of people aged 80 and older will presumably increase five-fold. In contrast to European countries of today for instance, where persons age 65 years or older already account for a higher percentage than children (i.e. persons under the age of 15), America's population is more balanced due to a fertility rate that almost compensates the country's mortality rate. Combined with a continuous flow of immigrants as well as higher standards of living and life expectancy at rise, the United States of America continue to grow and are therefore expected to keep number three of the world's most populous countries (ibid 49). Of its currently 301.6 million inhabitants, children and teenagers up to age 17 make up 24.5% of the entire U.S. population compared to 12.6% that include people aged 65 or older (U.S. Census 2007).

Nevertheless, America – like so many other countries – is aging, has been aging over the last decades, and continues to age. Regarding projections for America's resident population by race, or else, origin, and age, median age was projected to be 37 years by 2010 (median age in 2005 was 35.2), and is expected to increase to 37.4 years by 2015; while Caucasians show a generally higher projected median age (38.9 in 2015), Asians are projected to display a median age of 38.3, and persons of Hispanic or Latino as well as of Black or African American origin display expected median ages around 30 (U.S. Census 2008). A disproportion in relation to gender accounts for a so called female graying in and of America: Women have a generally higher life expectancy of approximately five years and thus contribute to a disproportioned sex ratio amongst people

aged 65 and older, in that there are 77 men per 100 women. Due to an increasing number of immigrants of predominantly Hispanic descent, America's aging population is getting more and more culturally and ethnically diverse. Today, the majority of older Americans over 65 are made up by non-Hispanic Whites or Caucasians, however given that Hispanic as well as Asian minorities age proportionally faster than the predominantly white population, that is expected to change by mid-century (ibid). Aging and the aged in America, meaning the process of aging as well as the people who have aged, has thus become and will continue to become as diverse as the country itself.

Consequences of an aging population not only have an effect on societies as a whole, but the aged and the aging process lasting well into old age certainly have implications on and influence individuals and collectives alike³. Therefore, aging and the concept of age itself has been and is intensively studied by various fields and disciplines that have based their research on likewise various definitions of and approaches to age and the aging process. In that respect, gerontology is considered a multidisciplinary science that is based on ageism as a socio-cultural concept and thus combines the study of old age and aging from biological, psychological, sociological, but also cultural points of view (see Andersson; Wilmoth and Ferraro; Kart and Kinney). In terms of culture, cultural gerontology hereby embodies the idea that "... age isn't just about how the body changes as time passes, but about the way culture and society define people at various stages of life." (Jaschik 2007). Based on a post-modern approach to identity, age – alongside class, ethnicity, gender, ideology, race, and sexuality - functions as another identity forming factor and as a significant socio-cultural factor within a specific cultural framework that accounts for individual as well as collective identities (see Hall 1980).

Regardless of cultural implications, the term and noun 'age', on an individual level, refers to a person's duration of his or her lifetime as measured in years. It is in that respect to a person's latter or last part of life when he or she is actually considered old, as opposed to being young. This dichotomy of youth versus age and young versus old accounts for defining old as not being young, both interrelating and juxtaposing these two constructs. Thus what is considered old might be interdependent on and deduced from what is considered young, while being young implies just the opposite, i.e. not being old (Maierhofer 256).

3 'Old age' generally refers to the final stage of a human's life, yet - as explored later on in great detail - there is no universal definition of age. When someone in fact is or becomes old always depends on the respective socio- cultural context as well as scientific and academic approach. Regarding studies in the Western world, old age, a.k.a. late adulthood, generally coincides with the legal age of retirement, i.e. people who are 60 or 65 years or older, also referred to as seniors.

If, for socio-cultural reasons, characteristics such as beauty, rebellion, and innocence are generally associated with the young and thus youth implies beauty, rebellion, and innocence, for instance, the old and age consequently refers to and is associated with unattractiveness, conservatism, and wisdom. This, in turn, not only defines what age is and is not, but moreover implies certain roles and expected role behavior based on age.

Basically, aging is the process that - from a life course perspective - runs continuously, and is framed by the event of birth and one's death. Due to cultural connotations and implications of 'age' (referring to the latter part of life), it is argued that the term and adjective 'aging' relates to the second half of one's lifetime, therefore an older person is identified as a person that moves from midlife to death. Corresponding to the acknowledged dichotomy of young versus old or else youth versus age, 'growing up' refers to the coming of age and becoming an adult, while 'growing old' relates to life's last phase before death. It has been acknowledged that "age is an essential ingredient of all cultures since age is an ascribed characteristic of all individuals. Consequently age [...] is a cultural domain" (Fry 5) and thus "meaning and values are aspects which are cultural. Age, as codified and interpreted culturally, has meanings and values directly affecting the behavior of individuals in all cultural systems." (ibid 44) Therefore, age is a socio-cultural marker that is dependent on and changes with various cultural contexts. In addition to cultural differences regarding criteria and factors that decide and classify who is young or old, there are tremendous differences concerning cultural stereotypes, clichés, and stereotypes. Interestingly, despite cultural and historical differences, something that all Western cultures and societies appear to do have in common is named social categories of people who are considered old (Foner 8) as well as ageism relating to images of older persons (Fry 19). Negative attitudes towards age and aging can be found in late 19th century paintings and 21st century stereotyping alike; it was remarked over twenty years ago that "old in modern society is associated with precarious welfare, low status, rolelessness, social isolation, and alienation," (Maddox 32), and likewise, aging persons are nowadays advised and motivated to age 'productively' as well as 'successfully', relating to and classifying the old that - for whatever reason - fail to do so as underprivileged or irrelevant in several aspects, namely socially, psychologically, and economically (Tirrito 153).

Age and old age in modern societies is defined culturally and consequently, temporally too. In that respect, age refers to the culturally determined concept of linear time, describing human existence and a human lifetime as being unidirectional, moving from birth to death; rapidly progressing; and non-recurring (Helman 54). At the same time, time is culturally defined and dealt within that

culture adds meaning and its specific connotation to time. In Western societies of the 21st century, so called 'monochronic' time dictates hours and minutes, years and decades, amongst other things labeling and defining different stages in human life and thus categorizing it into respective age groups (ibid 55). According to this linear concept of time, then, life is accounted a one-time project, encompassing various life stages distinguished by age and defined by clock and developmental time. Adult life has been divided into the trichotomy of adolescence, middle age, and old age for instance, the latter encompassing the age categories of the young old, and the old-old (amongst others see Foner; Suzman, Willis and Manton)⁴. It is due to cultural norms and standards that are culturally constructed, according and referring to specific milestones or assignments associated with those age categories, that being older accounts for and entails particular roles and role expectations with respect to particular age groups. Death, clearly, is inevitable, however age, or else, old age simply being the closest to it may also account for ageist and gerontophobic attitudes and tendencies in contemporary Western civilization.

Ageism – often used to imply stereotyping and in fact devaluating older persons - in general refers to the attitude and expectation that age as such is a role and identity determining factor in society, underlining the socio-cultural construction of age. Ascribing certain ideas and norms to particular age groups within a particular culture accounts for a particular treatment (with respect to social interactions as well rules and regulations) and representation (regarding portrayals and depictions in cultural artifacts such as the media for instance) as well as specific role expectations of those age groups within that particular culture. A person's role hereby corresponds to the pre-assigned and fixed behavioral patterns as well as everything that is associated with that particular gender, ethnicity, profession, religion etc. within a given society and cultural context. Meaning, "role" implies behavior on the stage of life. It refers to the content of our conduct as determined primarily by role expectations, which are the generally accepted social norms that define how a role ought to be played" (Falk et al. 2). Age roles therefore encompass and equal the sum of an individual's determined and expected behavioral patterns concerning a particular age within a particular society and culture, which - due to the fact they, just like any role, are not constitutional – are learned and internalized through processes of socialization which bring up for the individuals' identity.

In that norms generally function as guidelines, not playing by the rules and not satisfying the respective role expectations is therefore generally considered negative, which accounts for denotations such as something not being age

4 Note the natural usage of the terms, or else, concepts of ,young' as opposed to ,old'!