

Back in the Saddle Again

Ethics, Visibility, and Aging on Screen

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Abstract

This paper engages with filmic portrayals of older adults in the U.S. in order to ask questions about the impacts of mass media on reproducing, critiquing, or interrogating mainstream values and assumptions about aging. The study considers the recent Hollywood works *The Expendables* (2010) and *R.E.D.* (2010), as well as the independent documentary *Young@Heart* (2007). We forefront questions of visibility, invisibility, and recognition both in terms of what experiences and realities are rendered visible or invisible by mass media, but also in terms of the subjective experiences of many older adults in the United States.

Keywords: age, visibility, The Expendables, R.E.D., Young@Heart.

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With the inevitable aging of Hollywood's most successful stars, such as Bruce Willis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Morgan Freeman, the industry has been faced with a dilemma: how to continue profiting off celebrities who risk losing their cultural currency in a youth-obsessed field? One answer may be found in recent box-office triumphs, including *R.E.D.* (Dir. Schwentke 2010) and *The Expendables* (Dir. Stallone 2010), both of which spawned sequels in 2013 and 2012, respectively. In these two films, actors in their sixties and seventies behave as if immune to the effects of time (with the exception of a few gray hairs). Indeed, the only limit these characters experience are United States' society's stereotypes about aging. As media scholar Klaus Dodds notes in his study of gender, aging, and resilience in *Skyfall*, the 2012 James Bond film,

[...T]here has been a growing number of films (such as *The Wrestler* [Dir. Aronofsky, 2008], *Up in the Air* [Dir. Reitman, 2009], *Red* [sic, Dir. Schwentke, 2010], and *The Expendables* [Dir. Stallone, 2010]) that have addressed the role of aging men (and some aging women) and their lived experiences in neoliberal and authoritarian times (Boyle and Brayton). Through their relations with others, these films explore the subjective positions that might make their rehabilitation as a form of resilience rather than disposability. (Dodds 2014:120)

These films and other recent movies seemingly challenge previous mainstream cinematic representations of older adults as crotchety, lethargic, or irrelevant to contemporary society.

Yet, these Hollywood films actually perpetuate established stereotypes regarding aging in U.S. society in other ways. Their "solution" to the social anxiety caused by aging and death is to deny the realities of experiences of aging. Hollywood films make invisible the actuality of how people grow old in the U.S. One recent documentary problematizes these mainstream visualizations of older adults, giving a voice to this marginalized group. Young@Heart (Dir. Walker 2007) provides nuanced portraits of older adults, making visible both the joys and challenges of aging. The film counters dominant views of this demographic, offering compassionate and multi-dimensional portrayals of older adults as human beings. This paper engages with filmic portrayals of older adults in the U.S. in order to ask questions about the impacts of mass media on reproducing, critiquing, or interrogating mainstream values and

assumptions about aging. We forefront questions of visibility, invisibility, and recognition both in terms of what experiences and realities are rendered visible or invisible by mass media, but also in terms of the subjective experiences of many older adults in the United States.

Ultimately, this paper is concerned with the politics of the erasure of multidimensional portrayals of older adults as human beings. Mass-market films tend to perpetuate stereotypes regarding the geriatric in U.S. society by denying the realities of experiences of aging. In so doing, they render invisible the actuality of how people grow old in the U.S. However, the more nuanced portraits in works such as <code>Young@Heart</code> make visible the joys and challenges of aging. By making the realities of aging evident on screen, such films create a more ethical space for an often overlooked group. With inspiration from discussions in political theory of the capacities of the visual in forging ethical publics (cf. Hannah Arendt's <code>The Human Condition</code>), we call on mediamakers to consider how their own work erases or forefronts groups of people as moral, recognizable entities. The concept of being "back in the saddle," which appears in two films under consideration in this paper, serves as a metaphor for the visibility and engagement in society that mediamakers enable or disable in their portrayals of aging.

Why this research and why now? This study focuses on U.S. cinematic production at a time when the perspectives and experiences of baby boomers inform the dominant ideological paradigm in mainstream fiction filmmaking. The aging baby boomers' sense of self, how they are seen, and how they see themselves all contribute to the popular cultural vision of growing older in the U.S. More now than ever, Hollywood's images of older adults strive to limit the signs of aging to some grey hairs and a few wrinkles, offering a popular public an optimistic but, in truth, unattainable portrait of how older people should behave and look. While art house cinema, particularly films from the U.K. such as *Philomena* (Dir. Stephen Frears, 2013), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (Dir. John Madden 2011), and *Calendar Girls* (Dir. Nigel Cole, 2003), provide improved depictions of older adults to a niche market, these representations are still problematic, embracing the notion of aging as an idealized renaissance of the body, mind, and spirit.

Though no mediated representation of older adults will ever be entirely free of shortcomings, documentary film currently supplies one of the most constructive public spheres for addressing aging and its cultural perception. This comes as no surprise, since nonfiction filmmaking has provided a "voice" for the socially marginalized since the era of John Grierson and his work with the Empire Marketing Board film unit and the General Post Office throughout most of the 1930s. In regards to a film made under the auspices of Grierson by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton, documentary theorist and historian Bill Nichols explains:

Housing Problems (1935), for example, gave slum dwellers the opportunity to speak for themselves, in a synchronous sound interview format set within their own homes. The actual workers appeared on British screens for the first time, a sensational achievement in the days long before television or reality TV. (Nichols 2010:212)

Though Housing Problems raised ethical concerns regarding the victimization of documentary subjects, this ground-breaking film's insistence on allowing the subaltern to speak in their own words shaped the social issue nonfiction film as we know it today.

The mission of championing the disenfranchised continues today in the nonfiction filmmaking realm, and recent documentary efforts echo a general growing social consciousness regarding the visibility of older adults in society. As academia moves towards expanding aging studies, documentaries are at the forefront of changing the conversation, increasing the prominence of older adults on screen in a manner that provides an important and useful step in the right direction. Nonfiction films, such as *Elaine Stritch: Shoot Me* (Dir. Chiemi Karasawa, 2013) and *Carol Channing: Larger Than Life* (Dir. Dori Berinstein 2012), present a more holistic view of older adults, a trend already present in *Young@Heart*, which screened in 2007. One goal of this study is to encourage the creation of more media representations that follow *Young@Heart*'s lead, simultaneously acknowledging the limitations and existing problematic aspects of portraying older adults in the U.S. These forward-thinking documentaries grant an opportunity for media makers to complicate the cultural conversation about aging, dependency, personhood, and human rights. In other words, this is the moment for ageism to capture the attention of media makers, with the aim of accomplishing what filmmakers have already achieved vis-à-vis the representation of racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, etc.

In a context in which older adults confront everyday "ageism," media creators have an opportunity to create more accurate portrayals that critique ageism but simultaneously question the overzealous positive expectations embodied in the discourse of "successful aging." In a recent essay, anthropologist Sarah Lamb (2014) has contrasted a U.S. paradigm of "successful aging" (characterized by individual agency and control, independence, productive activity, and permanent personhood) with a more nuanced paradigm of the aging experience in India (embracing perspectives on "meaningful decline"). Lamb suggests that the experiences and perspectives of many older adults are rendered invisible by the United States ideal. In light of the cultural as-sumptions and unspoken values underlying the successful aging discourse, it would be easy to understand the sense of inadequacy experienced by an older adult in the United States who can-not or does not want to skydive in her 90s, or by someone whose macular degeneration means he must stop driving his car in his 70s. Are there no in-between, more nuanced and subtle, paths to portraying older adults that confront the realities of meaningful decline, illness, and death, but also the richness and variety of growing older?

In her recent research among older adults in the northeast United States, Caitrin Lynch has often encountered older adults lamenting that old people are invisible in U.S. society. For example, some people narrate experiences at restaurants or shops, when the staff will look to an accompanying adult child for information on the elder person's requests or needs—as if the older adults have no voice or desires. During an interview with Lynch, an eighty-five-year-old woman named Esther Martin eloquently described this experience of invisibility:

You just feel like you're a fifth wheel when you're with a younger group.... They don't let you join in in anything. . . . You're just sitting on the outside, looking in. And I felt that almost the day after my husband died, that feeling. It's just depressing. I remember being over at my son's around Easter Day, and my husband died in February. I remember being over there for Easter, and I was joining in, but I felt like a fifth wheel. (Lynch 2012:66)

Esther and many other older adults in the U.S. struggle to make sense of their changed social roles and personal experiences and desires in the context of widespread cultural assumptions that characterize youth as a time of activity and vitality and old age as a time of decline, decrepitude, and death. Theater and aging scholar Anne Davis Basting has called the attitude of many dementia caregivers toward their patients "chronic underestimitis"—a tendency to assume that someone cannot do things, that he or she is best ignored and put in a chair facing a

window (Basting 2010; cf. Basting 2009). This term can apply broadly to how many people in U.S. society tend to assess the potentials of older adults.

More generally, there are many aspects of everyday life in the United States in which older adults experience "ageism," a term coined by gerontologist Robert Butler in the late 1960s. Butler wrote:

Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender. Old people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old-fashioned in morality and skills....Ageism allows the younger generations to see old people as different from themselves; thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings. (Butler 1975:12)

In another publication, Butler wrote that ageism "reflects a deep seated uneasiness on the part of the young and middle-aged—a personal revulsion to and distaste for growing old, disease, disability; and fear of powerlessness, 'uselessness,' and death" (Butler 1969:243–44). This sense of dehumanization of older adults, perhaps as a result of fear of what is to come, is what Esther and others feel when they are rendered invisible by their own families, and by what they do or do not see reflected about themselves in mass media representations.

While actual older people seem invisible in U.S. culture, popular visualizations of aging in the media grow increasingly pervasive, as the baby-boomer generation enters retirement and struggles with stereotypes of what it means to become older. Mainstream Hollywood film provides one revealing arena where aging on screen offers insight into how U.S. society addresses the role of older adults in our communities. Initially, both R.E.D. and The Expendables appear to celebrate aging, suggesting that there is much to be learned from the wise and experienced. In R.E.D., the generational conflict appears throughout the film's plot, frequently used as a comic device at the expense of the naiveté or cockiness of younger generations. Bruce Willis' character, Frank Moses (Willis was 55 at the time of filming), has been forced into retirement by "some thumb-sucker," as described by the C.I.A. archivist played by Ernest Borgnine (age 93 at the time of the film's release), while Willis' younger C.I.A. counterpart and temporary nemesis, Agent Cooper, twice refers to him as "grandpa." A young secret agent wielding a shoulder-fired missile calls Marvin (played by fifty-six-year-old John Malkovich) "old man," before Marvin promptly kills the agent and responds: "Old man, my ass!" Repeatedly, the protagonists of the film demonstrate mental acumen, quick reflexes, and an impressive sagaciousness that the younger generation painfully and obviously lacks.

Though the generational conflict is less overt in *The Expendables*, its traces appear in the relationship between Barney Ross (played by Sylvester Stallone, 64 at the time of filming) and the rest of his mercenary crew. Ross is the eldest member of the group, and consistently makes "the right" choice when evaluating potential jobs and dangerous situations. Meanwhile, his younger colleagues are all marked as somehow flawed within the film's logic of uber-masculinity. Gunner Jensen (played by Dolph Lundgren) uses drugs, disobeys orders, and betrays his friends. Toll Road (played by Randy Couture) is traumatized by his cauliflower ear and routinely sees a therapist. Yin Yang (played by Jet Li) constantly complains how he should receive more money since he's shorter than everyone else and, thus, works harder to complete the same assignments. Even Jason Statham's character Lee Christmas has problems with his girlfriend and is fixated on

discussing romantic relationships with the male group. Only Ross is entirely rational, calm, mature, and moral, ultimately leading the gang to victory over the aging villains played by Eric Roberts (age 54) and former wrestler Steve Austin (a youthful 46).

Indeed, all the older adults in these two Hollywood films have only improved with age, since they are at the peaks of their lives. Aside from a few bald heads and some grey hair, no other outward markers identify the R.E.D. squad or Stallone's Ross as having any signs of the degeneration that accompanies growing older. Morgan Freeman's character Joe has stage 4 cancer throughout the film, but appears as spry and fit as ever, emerging from a getaway car to tell Moses' younger girlfriend that he's "Not dead. Just retired." He is also sexually frisky, teasing the nursing home attendant about her shapely bottom. In fact, Joe chooses to die as a sacrifice to save the other members of the team, asserting his agency in the face of illness (in other words, he doesn't allow cancer to beat him - he controls his own death on his terms). At the same time, in *The Expendables*, Ross uses every opportunity to show off his bulging muscular physique, his face described by one film critic as "tumefied to resemble a fleshy balloon" (Huber 78). Time and experience may have made these adults wiser, but they certainly have minimally touched their bodies. In other words, the bodily process of aging is rendered invisible.

This mainstream representation of aging adults unsurprisingly mirrors the "successful aging" movement in the United States. In her critique of the discourse of successful aging, Lamb explains:

No one uniform definition of successful aging emerges from this discourse, which spans thousands of articles, books, policy documents and websites; yet several common cultural themes underlying the varying definitions stand out, including: an emphasis on individual agency and control (you can be the drafter of your own successful aging); the value of independence and the importance of avoiding dependence; the value of activity and productivity; and a vision of not aging at all, while pursuing the goals of agelessness and what could be termed a permanent personhood. (Lamb 2014:4)

Lamb's analysis of successful aging is reflected in the way *R.E.D.* and *The Expendables* depict the aging process: all of the older adults in these films defy a youth-oriented culture's limitations and achieve individual agency and control by the end of the stories. They all demonstrate the importance of being independent and able to take care of oneself, while also showing how much they value their activity, productivity, and contributions to society (whether bringing the Vice President of the United States to justice or saving a mythical Caribbean island from a dictatorship and C.I.A. exploitation).

Most of all, these characters embody this "vision of not aging at all," maintaining their permanent personhood by insisting verbally and physically that the passing of time has not altered them in any negative way. Moses still performs crunches and boxes with agility during his morning exercise routine. When asked how she has adjusted to retirement, Victoria (played by Helen Mirren) tells Moses: "Well, I do get a bit restless sometimes. I take the odd contract on the side... I just can't stop. You can't just flip a switch and become someone else!" In other words, echoing the notion of "permanent personhood" identified by Lamb, Victoria is the same person now as she was thirty years ago when she actively hunted Soviet agents. Her "permanent personhood" is further emphasized later in the film when she resumes her torrid affair with former Russian spy Ivan Simanov as if no time had passed. In one memorable scene in *The Expendables*,

Christmas and Ross flee from the dictator's troops on the island, with Christmas preparing their small plane for takeoff while Ross throws explosives at the pursuing soldiers. As the plane's engines roar and the machine starts to take off, Ross sprints down a pier, jumps up in the air, and catches the side of the plane's open door. Ross proceeds to hang acrobatically from the plane as it splashes through water, receives bullets from the angry troops, and finally escapes into a higher altitude. Within the logic of the film, it seems perfectly plausible that a man who qualifies for membership in the AARP can achieve such a feat. By all indications, these mature bodies are ageless, or perhaps even improved with age (like a fine wine).

Audiences embraced this cinematic envisioning of successful aging in droves, earning *R.E.D.* over \$90 million dollars in the United States alone (almost \$22 million worldwide), while *The Expendables* grossed over \$103 million at home (and almost \$35 million worldwide), clearly marking both films as blockbusters. Why would a youth-driven culture endorse two films starring actors arguably 'past their prime'? One answer may be the changing demographics of moviegoers. Journalists Pamela McClintock and Tatiana Siegel explain:

Not even the youth-obsessed studios can ignore the numbers. There are 78 million baby boomers, defined as those born between 1946 and 1964. In 2010 - thanks in great part to advances in medicine - 40.3 million were over the age of 65, making them the fastest-growing segment of the population, according to the U.S. Census. That compares with 30.7 million people between 18 and 24. It's also the segment that most likes to go to the cinema. The MPAA reports that movie attendance across all age groups dipped in 2011 - save for those 60 and older (McClintock and Siegel 2012:64).

If Lamb's theories regarding the U.S. population embracing the concepts of "successful aging" are accurate, these movie-going baby boomers flock to the cinema to see images of their own desired 'ageless aging'—and so far, Hollywood obliges.

One example of this 'ageless aging' appears in a sequence from *R.E.D.*, where Moses meets his younger nemesis for the first time. After trading brief barbs, Moses and Cooper enter into hand-to-hand combat, destroying office furniture and glass in the process. Though both men suffer serious injuries, Moses ultimately overpowers Cooper and manages to elude capture. This sequence is particularly revealing, since the fight is accompanied on the non-diegetic soundtrack by Aerosmith's 1977 song "Back in the Saddle." As Moses brawls with the agent, spectators hear the following lyrics: "I'm back in the saddle again, I'm back, I'm back in the saddle again. I'm riding, I'm loading up my pistol; I'm riding I really got a fistful, I'm riding, I'm shining up my saddle, I'm riding, this snake is gonna rattle." Setting this song against images of Moses defeating Cooper encourages audiences to view the retired agent as experiencing a second youth. Having metaphorically returned to his former saddle, he displays the potency and prowess of older adults.

Propitiously, the phrase "back in the saddle" also appears in Stephen Walker's documentary *Young@Heart*, yet its use denotes a different meaning. In the non-fiction film that follows several months in the lives of a chorus group comprised of older adults, during one rehearsal chorus member Bob Salvini (age 76), discusses his passion for singing. Though still recovering from an almost lethal bout with spinal meningitis, he insisted on singing a solo with his beloved choral group because this activity makes him feel like himself again. Asserting that singing makes him feel "like being back in the saddle again," he quickly refuses to entertain any

possibility of leaving the group for health reasons. In this situation, the phrase isn't employed as a display of physical and mental domination, as it is in *R.E.D.* For Salvini, being 'back in the saddle' signifies returning to his life and his community. He views singing with the chorus as a valuable activity and contribution to society (in this case, the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, the chorus headquarters).

This moment in *Young@Heart* reveals how the documentary presents aging in a more productive and ethical light than its Hollywood counterparts (a term we use intentionally considering that *Young@Heart* received relatively wide distribution and financial success). While Walker certainly shows "successful aging" in this work (the chorus members are, as a whole, energetic, lively, productive, and active), he also includes passages that illustrate what Lamb refers to as "meaningful decline." Lamb (10) asserts that the United States' anti-aging culture reveals a "broad discomfort with situations of bodily and cognitive impairment, dependence, and human transience." Instead of denying or rendering invisible "the realities of change, decline and mortality" (Lamb 2014:9), U.S. society would benefit from acknowledging, discussing, and making visible the limitations and transformations that time brings. Describing counter-narratives among some of her U.S. research subjects who contest the successful aging discourse, Lamb maintains, "Adapting to and accepting change and limitations are thus, for these persons, an important part of aging well" (2014:9).

By featuring scenes where choral members struggle with illness, are hospitalized, and require help from others to get to and from rehearsals due to vision loss and impaired mobility, <code>Young@Heart</code> offers more compelling counter-narratives to support Lamb's critique of the dominant U.S. paradigm. When the narrator notes that Stan is "suffering from an extremely painful spinal condition," viewers almost feel his agony as he stands and practices the James Brown song "I Feel Good." Spectators watch the older adults read their sheet music with magnifying glasses, even though the lettering already looks enormous, and they hear the rhythms of a singer's oxygen machine keeping time along with the instruments during Coldplay's song "Fix You." Walker even includes in the film the deaths of two prominent members of the chorus, compassionately and poignantly chronicling the grief and mourning processes experienced by the group as they continue to rehearse and perform.

In Young@Heart, mortality is an accepted part of everyday life, and aging is made very visible on screen. For example, the first shot of the documentary is an extreme close-up of a screaming mouth with yellowing and missing teeth. The camera will eventually track back to reveal the owner of the mouth, choral member Eileen Hall (age 93), singing The Clash's punk anthem "Should I Stay or Should I go?" into a microphone on a concert-hall stage. Moreover, the choices of songs included in the chorus' repertoire humorously highlight the many issues that aging adults may face, such as experiencing intense boredom; feeling useless in society; missing lost loved ones; and anticipating and worrying about memory loss and, ominously, dementia.

Yet, these images are not enough. Merely appearing on screen does not grant older adults the agency in society to be valued as human beings. Public speech in the form of a filmic presence is not sufficient for concrete political and social change. Some may even point to the appearance of older adults on screen as an excuse to go no further, maintaining older adults' mar-ginalized status. Moreover, the audience for nonfiction filmmaking is highly specialized. After all, the demographic for documentary consumption has traditionally been limited to academia, libraries, museums, and fringe movie houses. Very few documentaries are widely released on a national scale.

While inclusion and presence on screen are not enough, they are an important beginning. Seeing and hearing older adults on screen in *Young@Heart* is an improvement over past representations, and raises spectator consciousness, if only for a moment. This new awareness will, hopefully, lead to further, more concrete action towards solidifying the human rights of older adults. After all, acknowledging the issue is the first step towards remedying the problem.

How would Hollywood benefit from making visible the financial, social, and physical precarity that can characterize the aging process? Rather than rendering invisible the signs of growing old in an effort to perpetuate the dominant paradigm of "successful aging," what would more nuanced portrayals mean for the baby boomer viewers, and audiences of all ages, who make sense of media images in light of their unspoken assumptions—and for whom media images feed those very assumptions? The documentary <code>Young@Heart</code> offers one possible model for how to constructively and ethically represent aging on screen, embracing the positive and negative aspects of growing old. If the landscape of portrayals of aging experiences expands in this direction, perhaps, finally, new generations of filmgoers will be able to enjoy an improvement over gerontologist Robert Butler's lament four decades ago and demonstrate the ability "to identify with their elders as human beings" (Butler 1975:12). Though media representations alone are not enough, their positive impacts influence lived realities, challenging us to rethink our beliefs about what it means to age.

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