

Pamela Gravagne (2013). *The Becoming of Age. Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. Jefferson, North Carolina & London: MacFarland, 216 pp. ISBN 978 0 7864 7260 4 (paperback)

REVIEWED by ANNE LEONORA BLAAKILDE\*

Movies about later life that present old people as protagonists are not common, although in the last decades an increasing number of this kind of film has been seen on cinema screens. Therefore, it is no wonder there are few cinematic studies with interpretations of later life in movies. This book with interpretations of later life on screen is a welcome contribution to cultural gerontology, not least because its fresh interpretations are inspired by a rich theoretical insight from perspectives not yet widely incorporated within cultural gerontology.

Gravagne's book contains four chapters, each representing interpretations of cinematic visions related to the topics: Masculinities, Older women, Intimacy and desire, and Alzheimer's. These chapters are "wrapped" in two theoretical chapters with loads of inspiring thoughts. In the first theoretical chapter, it is declared and shown that a dominant narrative of decline in later life exists, and it is stated that when we watch films about aging and old age, we need to critically examine how categories of aging are materially and discursively constituted. In order to do so, we need to

\* Anne Leonora Blaakilde, Department of Media, Cognition and Communication, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark

understand different philosophical and theoretical foundations for our perceptions of aging. For this purpose, Pamela Gravagne presents four different epistemologies of aging: an essentialist, a constructivist, a combination of essentialism and constructivism, and, finally a collapse between essentialism and constructivism. It is in the fourth spectrum that we are presented with fairly new thinking within cultural gerontology, with the integration of Karen Barad's *agential realism*, indicating that discourses and material matter are entangled and mutually interfluent upon each other in what Barad calls *intra-actions*. Drawing also upon Donna Haraway's thinking about entanglement between the natural and the social which leads to fluidity, transformations, and a permanent state of becoming with, Pamela Gravagne fetches the title of her book by pointing to the idea that aging is an entangled web of becoming, which, according to Gravagne, indicates "constantly becoming different" (p. 12).

Chapter 2 is an investigation of masculinities and aging as they are represented in, for example, *Gran Torino* and *Up*. The study is incepted with an introduction about ageism, and the author discusses how images of masculine normativity are centered around physical strength and rationality. Deriving from the industrial age, the male role is also expected to be a breadwinning worker. These images may be a challenge for the aging male protagonists in the films interpreted here, who have retired from the working force, have lost strength (or become unemployed), and maybe also have lost mental capacity or full sensation. Gravagne focuses here primarily on the aging male. However, these ideals of masculinity can of course challenge men in all other ages, though we tend to connect these kinds of frailties to aging. Gravagne's intention is to find perspectives in these movies where protagonists challenge the given norms, especially the narrative of decline. Such a subversive representation is demonstrated to some degree, when the protagonists counteract expectations to their role. On the other hand, Gravagne also shows how they concurrently seem to adapt to other images, that is, the choice of death in order not to be a burden to someone, or choosing the value of grandparenthood as a helper, legitimizing the existence of an old person.

In chapter 3, old women in movies are analyzed, and the author shows the double dilemma of being old and female on screen. These women are culturally inscribed to perform body work and present themselves as if

they do, yet they are simultaneously seen as being narcissistic for doing so. By applying feminist and ageist theorists like Martha Nussbaum, Margaret Gullette, and Kathleen Woodward, Gravagne emphasizes that older women are subject to being silenced and made invisible. Like in the analysis of male rebellions by the older men in movies, the author concludes that even though older female protagonists in movies may represent new and surprising ways of acting in later life, the movies represent traditional "happy endings." Thus, the movies also subscribe to cultural expectations of older people as being controlled, devalued, and silenced.

The fourth chapter concerns intimacy and sexuality in later life, where the author discusses movies like *Something's Gotta Give*, *The Mother*, and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* with characters in romantic and sexual situations. Here, Gravagne presents an interesting short historical explanation on why romance and sexuality has been disconnected from later life. She also touches upon constricting expectations to people in later life, demonstrated for instance by older people's adult children. Gravagne challenges these interpretations by means of perspectives from haptic and sensuous theory, suggesting that when intimacy and sexuality in later life is on stage, emphasis on embodied touch and sensation may be valued as much as the current, primary focus on the visible. Such a perspective, argues Gravagne, could be a relief for the fear of decline connected to growing old in our culture. After all, Gravagne states, the tangible physical and emotional connections through touch with others actuate a meaningful social existence. Also, an important issue raised in this chapter is the idea and acceptance of changes and *becoming*.

Finally, the fifth chapter is about memory, forgetting, and Alzheimer's, which has also been a topic in several movies. These issues touch upon considerations like: what is a self, and how do we relate to changing selves such as changing minds and the perceptions of rationality? As in the previous chapters, interesting philosophers and theorists are incorporated to imprint the analysis with compelling reflections.

In my opinion, the great value of this book is its richness in theoretical inspirations, applied to make interesting interpretations of a variety of movies concerning people in later life. These theoretical inspirations imply that the readings welcome fluent perspectives, porosity, leakiness, and transgressions of borders or binary distinctions, regardless if these are

between reality and fiction, matter and image, object and subject, or other classic inheritances from Descartes and Newton. Gravagne shows how this kind of thinking is implemented in modern movies. She also states with the philosopher Deleuze that "... this stream of images does not *represent* the world, but literally *shapes* us and the world around us" (p. 162). A point taken from Deleuze, Karen Barad, and others is that *representationalism* is a static and restrictive perspective, that tends to ignore the fluidity and temporality of everything in the world. This includes ideas about becoming old. Gravagne further cites these two theorists, indicating that their thinking:

... characterizes matter and meaning, time and space, as neither determinate nor unchanging, but as mutually constituted through dynamic and ongoing intra-actions in which individuals, whether objects or living beings, emerge through specific discursive and material practices (p. 165).

From a critical perspective, this quote is an example of a general impreciseness in reference practice and quoting in this book; that is, here mixing Deleuze and Barad in speaking about "individuals" which is not a word in Karen Barad's vocabulary. Contrarily, Barad opposes the Western idea of individuals which she connects to the representationalist thinking (Barad 2007). Though fluency is a phenomenon which is approved of in these theoretical approaches, readers may want to be able to discern references from each other in order to track them and their inspiring ideas. Also, since the French philosopher Deleuze is mentioned as one of the primary sources of inspiration, it is a shame that his name is sometimes not spelled properly (see p. 174).

The overall suggestion of age as "becoming" is described as a "constantly becoming different" (p. 12), and the chapters with interpretations of masculinities, older women, and intimacies tend to recommend a changing from the present situation – and cultural positions – to new and more flexible ones. The intention is to get rid of the narrative of old age about decline as a restricted position. This is a wonderful idea which many gerontologists would subscribe to. However, is this not another binary representationalism connected to the rather static image of the narrative of decline? How can we be sure that all old people want to set their old age free? Or, with the words of Deleuze (p. 169): "... [Time is] giving us chance after chance to

combine our past with our present in all sorts of new and unexpected ways." Isn't this ideal of living in new and unexpected ways *sui generis* a representation of just another normativity of later life, related to liberal individualism among certain privileged populations among the old – as well as in the younger population?

The book does not explicitly discuss this, but the interpretations of specific themes in movies provide readers with interesting contemplations of the dilemmas and equilibriums between images of decline and practices of life quality in later life. The discussions include very important issues of the complexities related to both images and practices of aging, because a multitude of aspects in life is so intricately interwoven. In a temporal perspective like aging, these conditions become even more pluripotent.

As Gravagne posits, these intricate complexities of life are difficult to grasp for people who are influenced by Western epistemological history, because we are used to thinking in dichotomies. Her book is, however, a very good example of erudite ways to take up the challenge. It is recommendable for all scholars of Cultural and Social Gerontology providing the reader with sagacious inspiration for considerations with a theoretical twist.

## References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gravagne, P. (2013). *The Becoming of Age. Cinematic Visions of Mind, Body and Identity in Later Life*. Jefferson, North Carolina & London: MacFarland.