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“Old Tropes through New Lenses: Representing the Older Actor
in Manoel de Oliveira’s I’m Going Home and Roger Michell’s Venus”

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Introduction

“All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exists and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts, / His acts being seven ages.” (Shakespeare 1988: 638, Act II sc. 7, v. 139-143) Four hundred years after Shakespeare’s famous evocation of ‘the theatre-of-life’ trope, historical and scientific changes have radically transformed our ‘seventh age,’ and ageing has become, in Gilleard and Higgs’ words, “a near-universal experience” due to its highly socialized and cultural attributes. (2000: 1) Yet, the theatre metaphor that is evoked in As You Like It is still valid in its universal representation of human mortality, and its symbolic formulation of old age as ‘an act’ or even as a ‘role’ is particularly relevant today: the revolution of longevity in Western societies and the fragmentation of the process of ageing into myriad experiences, have almost rendered old age, borrowing from Jaime Gil de Biedma’s poem, “the only plot in the play.” (1981: 117)

The usefulness of the theatrical metaphor to express contemporary realities of ageing is confirmed by its appearance in various discourses that express or analyze this phenomenon from distinctive perspectives. Fictional texts which materialize the theatre-of-life abstraction through an actor-figure or another representative of the theatrical

professions are especially meaningful examples.¹ Their double metaphoricity, as it were, is also reworked in some philosophical discourses that can be applied to ageing studies. This is the case of performativity theory, as confirmed by Valerie Barnes Lipscombe and Leni Marshall's claim that "the concept of age" is "a performative" in its own right. (2010: 1)²

In the light of these artistic and conceptual connections, this paper will look at the interaction between performance, performativity and old age in two cinematic fictionalizations of ageing, namely, Manoel de Oliveira's I'm Going Home (Je rentre à la maison, 2001) and Roger Michell's Venus (2006). As will be shown, these European films reformulate some universalizing constructions of the theatrical metaphor of life through a contemporary perspective that also includes the gender-specific experience of the older man. Additionally, the correlation between the various fields of performance and the discourse of performativity that may be observed in both of them highlights the

¹ This is the case of Angela Carter's Wise Children (1992) or Philip Roth's The Humbling (2009), both of which have ageing actors as protagonists; of Hanif Kureishi's The Body (2002), whose main character is an ageing playwright that defies old age by having a body transplant, following the advice of another ageing actor; or, more recently and in the theatrical domain itself, of Jan Lauwers' latest production, The Art of Entertainment (2011), in which an old actor with memory problems is offered to commit suicide live in a TV show.

² Recent publications such as Ageing, Performance, and Stardom: Doing Age on the Stage of Consumerist Culture, (Swinen and Stotesbury, 2012) or the various papers that turned to or evolved around performative theory in the last ENAS International Symposium of Cultural Gerontology (Maastricht 2011) reinforce the relevance of performativity theory in present developments of ageing studies.

ways in which ageing can lead to a re-creation of the Self and/or, eventually, to the ultimate period of an individual's agency.³

Rise and Fall of the Ageing Actor: Manoel de Oliveira's I'm Going Home

Manoel de Oliveira's I'm Going Home –*Je rentre à la maison* in the original title– offers a perfect case of symbiosis between the ordinary and the theatrical through Gilbert Valence, a septuagenarian actor played by the theatre and film star Michel Piccoli. Gilbert's life radically changes when his daughter and son-in-law die in an accident that leaves his little grandson orphaned. The contrast between his personal drama and professional success is slowly transformed into another type of opposition: namely, the one created between the character's emotional resilience and his professional decline.

³ Regarding the intersection between the theatrical metaphor and representations of old age in particular, the cinema has also created its own classics in its relatively short history: Billy Wilder's Sunset Boulevard (1950), John M. Mankiewicz's All about Eve (1950), George Cukor's A Star is Born (1954), Robert Aldrich's What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962) or John Cassavettes' Opening Night (1977) are all famous Hollywood stories of ageing actors. Other theatrical professions have been represented in contemporary films through ageing leading characters, as with the sexagenarian playwright of Nancy Meyers' Something's Gotta Give (2003) or the producer approaching her seventies in Stephen Frears' Mrs Henderson Presents (2005), to name two comedies from both sides of the Atlantic which have women protagonists. These new-millennium examples differ from their mid-twentieth-century predecessors in their positive portrayal of old age and their avoidance of an irrevocably decadent tone, but there are still contemporary films which resort to the theatrical metaphor to depict old age in all its lights and shadows.

In the first half of the film, the presentation of Gilbert as a talented actor empowers him as an ageing figure: in the first sequence, Oliveira shows Gilbert playing the decrepit king in Eugène Ionesco's Le roi se meurt with a masterful control of movement, vocal delivery and acting tempo. Later on, another sequence reflects Gilbert's skilful interpretation of Prospero in a production of The Tempest. Even if Le Roi and Prospero are powerful symbols of dispossession at a literary level, in the theatrical world they are signs of prestige for mature performers, and they enable a positive use of agedness on the stage.⁴

Beyond the theatrical domain, and despite his family's tragedy, Gilbert's successful theatrical background also invests the character with an assertive personality. This is reflected in the sequences that represent Gilbert's pleasant life in Paris as a pseudo-anonymous upper-middle-class citizen. The camera movement of his taxi sequences, and the use of a subjective point of view in many of the shots of which they are composed –which are edited in juxtaposition with close-ups of Gilbert's smiling face– signify the actor's dynamic and optimistic outlook. Likewise, the sequences that show his café and window-shopping routines present the character's enjoyment of his own privacy. In particular, a sequence in which the actor buys a new pair of shoes symbolizes the actor's ability to 'step into new roles' when necessary, while at the same

⁴ In this respect, Gilbert's 'aged' Self at the beginning of the film could be said to manifest itself through these two roles: namely, that of a powerful person who, like Ionesco's Roi, is approaching death, yet refuses to 'play' a 'dying man' with all his might; that of a master who, like Prospero, is aware of the younger hands that are waiting to receive and transform his craft, yet cannot help but express his attachment for his work; or that of an actor who recognizes the ephemeral nature of life in the ephemerality of the theatre itself, but insists on playing the last scene with the same intensity as the first one.

time suggesting the ways in which consumerism can help older citizens attain a lively presentation of their Selves. (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 104, Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 9-10) Another sequence that shows Gilbert having coffee with his agent, which is partly created through detail shots of his new shoes, confirms the metaphorical value of this object as a site of restorative consumption.

Throughout the first part of the film, then, Gilbert's ageing body is depicted as a fully inhabited corporeality that is 'performative' in the Austinian sense (Austin 1971): in the theatre, the actor's 'illocutionary' acts –through which he has the power to 'do' what he 'says' and control what he wants to signify– match his biological age to his own advantage; in the city, he equally performs his age comfortably, as if his theatrical life also had a transitive or 'perlocutionary' effect on his actions in 'the real world' and Paris was as warm and familiar to him as a well-trodden stage. Yet, as the film progresses, Gilbert's performative acts acquire a more deconstructive meaning. In Parker and Kosofky's words, deconstructive performativity has not so much to do with "the extroversion of the actor" but with the introversion of the signifier." (1995: 2) Indeed, a series of events that mark the second part of the plot can be interpreted as undermining the extroversion of Gilbert's performativity as a senior actor. In this new phase of his ageing process, Gilbert is led to absorbing negative meanings of his own age(dness) rather than re-acting against them.

The first of these episodes occurs in a night sequence in which a mugger steals Gilbert's new shoes and, hence, unveils the actor's fragility as an older man. The vulnerability of his barefoot body on the streets of Paris resembles that of the "floating bodies" which Gérard Imbert describes as "having been cut off from their social domains" in a study of postmodern films. (2010: 151) A second event creates a new

crack in the actor's self-perception: against his agent's insistence, Gilbert rejects the clichéd role of a fooled old man in a popular violence-and-sex TV show, which is clearly unworthy of his career and is yet presented as a unique opportunity. As signs of Gilbert's gradual disempowerment, these episodes disclose some of the complexities of ageing masculinities in contemporary societies: in the modern world, as Jeff Hearn contends, 'maleness' and 'aged(ness)' are no longer mutually reinforcing as means to power. (Featherstone and Wenirck 1995: 100)

Oliveira portrays this aspect of masculine ageing through a new episode: having to retain public visibility, Gilbert eventually accepts a rushed substitution in an American film in which he has to play the role of a younger man. The sequence that shows a make-up session in which the actor has to be rejuvenated significantly portrays the mismatch between Gilbert's 'personal age' and the 'social' and 'chronological' ages that are returned to him through his image in the mirror. In particular, the camera reveals the actor's expression of uneasiness when, throughout the characterization process, he is forced to confront the reflection of his own "masquerade of ageing," to use Mike Hepworth's metaphor. (2000: 148)

Gilbert's progressive alienation as a categorized 'old man' leads to the last event that alters his performative power completely. After making several mistakes during the shooting, Gilbert suddenly leaves the set by simply saying that he is "going home." A new sequence shows him going through his lines again and again on the street, as if he was a demented old man. Gilbert's decontextualized street 'performance' renders the actor's doubly 'othered' corporeality a performative text that can be easily misinterpreted. This is also depicted in the last sequence of the film: the close-up that reveals Gilbert's grandson's shocked gaze when his grandfather climbs up the stairs to

his bedroom with effort, signals his incapacity to understand the cause for the actor's devastated appearance. The fearful sadness in the boy's eyes, contained in the film's last detail shot, also seems to announce the effect of Gilbert's return, that is, his social –and perhaps biological- death.

Gilbert's last performative is imbued with at least two kinds of ambiguity, which at the same time elicit questions about psychological and socio-cultural aspects of the ageing process. On the one hand, Gilbert's choice "to opt out of having to sell [his] labour" (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 210) can also be interpreted as a liberating and dignifying act. On the other hand, Gilbert's abrupt professional downfall signals the harmful effect that negative internalizations of old age can have on the individual. Several studies have confirmed that "internalized ageism lead[s] to poorer physical and mental performances, which are then treated as 'objective' evidence of an age-related decline." (Gilleard and Higgs 2000: 137) Thus, Gilbert's performative act 'to go home' –and, hence, retire– retains its sense of agency as a radical action that is both named and enacted out of the character's own will; at the same time, it also succumbs to the stage directions of an external script that he did not originally intend to play.

Love... at Last?: The Old Seducer in Roger Michell's Venus

The protagonist of Venus, a formerly well-known English actor who is played by Peter O'Toole, presents a very different evolution. The film's director, Roger Michell, and its script-writer, Hanif Kureishi, depict Maurice Russell as an artist in his mid-seventies whose diminished economic status has highly reduced his freedom of choice in the acting profession. In contrast with Gilbert's rebellion, Maurice accepts the decline of his career with resignation and even with a certain sense of humour. This is reflected in a

sequence in which he laughs at his corpse-like characters with his wife Valerie, played by Vanessa Redgrave. In general, Maurice's life seems to obey the social pattern of what is expected from him both as an aged actor and as an older man: as a formerly respected professional, he knows that playing decadent men and perhaps writing his *memoirs* is basically what is left for him to do; as a man who abandoned his home years ago and has become detached from his children, he finds refuge in the scarce visits he pays to his wife at their old house, and his daily meetings with two old friends from the theatre world.

These aspects of Maurice's characterization render his body a double –or even triple- textualization of ageing that almost becomes a performative *memento mori* on different levels of fictionalization: on a first level, Maurice's performances of his decrepit characters remind the spectator of the imminence of Maurice's own demise; Maurice's frail health, aggravated by prostate cancer, suggests the possibility of the character's death on a second fictional level; and, on a third level of representation, viewers cannot help but think of the ephemerality of Peter O'Toole's own long and applauded trajectory as a theatre and film star, especially when a photograph of him as a young man is used to announce Maurice's death on the newspaper.

This palimpsestic reading of Maurice's ageing body acquires moments of performative intensity when at least two of these levels interact with each other. For example, a medium shot of the actor's dying body on a hospital bed misleads the spectator into thinking that Maurice himself is agonic until a pull-back shot discloses a film set. A reverse case of theatrical ambivalence occurs when Maurice almost faints during his performance at another shooting: the viewer can easily think that his weakness is pretended until members of the staff interrupt the scene to assist him. These

cases of doubly ritualized behaviour, to use Richard Schechner's term, (1995) signal once more the illocutionary power of Maurice's corporeality as both signifier and signified of the biological age it represents, and of the socio-cultural readings to which his body is submitted. With regard to the latter, Michell's metacinematic techniques enhance Peter O'Toole's and Maurice's corporealities as a vehicle of fictions, as a site of memory –of performed and lived experiences- and as a channel of the time that evaporates through all of them.

Nevertheless, the film's plot soon unveils a different facet of the protagonist's performativity that singularizes the character's agency in the last phase of his life. This is manifested through the challenging love story that Kureishi creates between Maurice and Jessie, a twenty-year-old girl who happens to be the great-niece of one of Maurice's actor-friends.⁵ Even if Jessie's personality reflects the insolent vanity of an uneducated young girl, Maurice rapidly feels attracted towards her. The difficult but at the same time intimate relationship that slowly develops between these antagonistic characters constitutes the centre of Michell's narrative, and progressively unveils several aspects of late-life masculinity that are all too often represented through clichéd portraits of older men in other films. By deconstructing those clichés, *Venus* reveals the empowering potential of Maurice's ritualized behaviour in his professional and personal life.

One of the stereotypes that is counteracted through Maurice's unusual 'acts of love' is that of 'the grumpy old man,' which is in a way embodied by Ian, Jessie's great-

⁵ This is not Michell and Kureishi's first collaborative experiment on the polemics of inter-generational love: their film *The Mother* (2003), released three years before *Venus*, explores the difficult and passionate relationship between a grandmother and a man who is half her age.

uncle.⁶ Maurice is contrasted with his friend through his capacity to listen to the young girl without judging her. 'The-funny-old-man' figure, also personified by Ian, is undermined by Maurice's characterization, too. Despite the sequences that comically present his curiosity for Jessie's body or thoughts, the actor's elegance and deeper understanding of the situations they go through together supersede any inferiorizing image of his capacities.

The same happens with the clichéd image of 'the dirty old man,' which in the film always lurks as a menace through the detail shots of the eyes of drivers who take Maurice and Jessie to several places, through Jessie's own mistrust of Maurice's forwardness, and more explicitly through Jessie's boyfriend's use of this cliché to insult the actor. Maurice's sexuality is much more complex, though, especially after the operation that leaves him impotent. His search for pleasure is more based on his fantasies about Jessie's body than on a real wish to have sex with her. This is shown in the sequence in which he declaims Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 while Jessie is having a bath. In this scene, their union is presented as being sustained by a mental rather than a physical bond, and this is signified through a cinematic trick of perspectives: the classical use of shot and counter-shot montage makes the viewer think that both characters are looking at each other and, hence, are in the same space, but in fact, as the last shots reveal through a rupture of the continuity-editing rule, they are in different rooms.

⁶ This stereotype is exploited and explored in classical comedies like Neil Simon's The Odd Couple (1965), and in contemporary films such as Grumpy Old Men (1993) and its sequel Grumpier Old Men (1995). (Chivers 2011: 100)

Conscious of the physical and social barriers that separate them, Jessie lets Maurice touch her hand, kiss her shoulders or smell her from time to time. Enhanced by the cultural reference to 'Venus,' the nickname whereby the actor chooses to re-name her, the unrefined young girl is hence re-constructed as the source of a desire that is more intellectual than physically-felt. Considering the performative power of Maurice's actions and words, and borrowing from Edward Said's phrase, (2007) the old actor seems to create a 'late style' of seduction that contrasts with his past as a reputed womanizer and with the crudeness of Jessie's boyfriend.⁷

Despite the film's deconstruction of ageist clichés related to older men through Maurice's performatives, the character's last relationship with a woman is also impregnated with the forms of biological and social 'otherness' that may define the ageing male. (Featherstone and Wernick 1995: 8-9) This is made evident towards the end of the film when Jessie and her boyfriend persuade Maurice to go for a walk so that

⁷ This 'late style' of courting is also displayed in Maurice's last encounter with his wife: in a touching scene in which the old actor says goodbye to Valerie in case he dies soon, he confesses he did love her once and ends up kissing her with an extreme and sad delicacy. A completely different sequence with Jessie, which is infused with an invigorating tone through the lyrics and music of Corinne Bailey Rae's "Put Your Records On," (2006) also shows the actor's chivalrous approach towards the young girl. In this scene, Maurice takes Jessie around London in a white limousine, from which Bailey Rae's song emanates as diegetic music. In a way, this sequence could be read as a 'late' version of the famous limousine scene in Garry Marshall's Pretty Woman (1990): if in Marshall's film, Richard Gere's attractive body appeared through the white limousine's top window as a reworked version of the fairy-tale knight on a white horse, in Venus Peter O'Toole plays his knightly role by sitting down on the limousine's back seat, and letting Jessie's sculptural body emerge from the top window instead, thus rendering her the goddess of youth that can be glorified –and, comically, thus making it possible for him to admire her bare legs without being judged.

they can use his house to have sex. In an attempt to restore his dignity, Maurice returns sooner than expected to kick the two lovers out, but his sudden arrival ends up with a fight and Jessie's knocking him down. This act of intergenerational violence confines the actor to his bed; yet, ironically enough, it also prepares him for his last performative act, which has a direct –perlocutionary– effect on the young female figure. When the paramedics ask the actor how he was attacked, Maurice cleverly plays the role of the 'forgetful old man': instead of accusing the girl, he says he would like 'Venus' to take care of him until he recovers. Responding to Maurice's theatrical and honest act of forgiveness, Jessie immediately accepts to do so.

Even if Venus could be classified as a comedy, or even as an alternative 'romantic' comedy, it does not elude the inevitable death of its protagonist at the end. Nevertheless, the few scenes that follow Maurice's demise show the lessons that the other characters have learnt through the actor's last performance as devoted lover and friend across age-, gender- and even social-class divides. Significantly, Michell also emphasizes the protagonist's ultimate bet on life when the actor is shown visiting an open-air theatre before the fight scene. Through the emptiness of the stage and the cacophony of imaginary sounds, dialogues, monologues, laughter and applause which the actor silences with Hamlet's famous line "to be or not to be," the spectator can feel not only the presence of a past that is gone, but also the character's willingness to "take arms against a sea of troubles" and "sleep / no more." (Shakespeare 1987: 240, Act III sc. 1, v. 57-61)⁸

⁸ This moment of late-life acceptance and renovation of the Self reinforces other sequences in which the actor refuses to be regarded only as a terminating being: this refusal is expressed, for example, when he

As Rosa Regàs explains, the fabulous and mysterious power of time is manifested more vividly in old age: when time seems to run away, it actually expands, waiting to be filled with life. (2011: 98, 104) This paradoxical perception of time, which is only possible when the old person acts as a veritable agent despite their fading existence, attains its climax when Maurice takes Jessie to the seaside. Having felt the renovating power of the sea's cold water on his naked feet, Maurice treats Jessie as an equal by saying, "Now, we could really talk," and then leans on her shoulder to die. The expectation of a continuing conversation that is created by Maurice's last line remains unfulfilled in that sequence; but, on a fictional level, its invisible continuity –which remains suspended in the conditional value of 'could'– is reflected in the recognition of those who survive him and have somehow been 'changed' by him, as shown in the sequences that follow.

Conclusion

The body of the actor is a living site of performativity that displays an illocutionary and perlocutionary power in its ritualized behaviour. In both theatrical and cinematic domains, the actor's body may symbolize the performative potential of any individual, as well as the processes of repetitive citation through which their corporeality can be mis- or re-interpreted. As has been demonstrated, the European films I'm Going Home and Venus exploit and reformulate the classical metaphor of 'the theatre of life' through the palimpsestic and dialogical body of their male actor-figures. By doing so, they encompass two performative narratives of ageing that counteract essentialist perceptions

rejects being treated with pity at the hospital; or simply whenever he does not conform to the role of the old wise man. As he tells Ian, "I am about to die and know nothing about myself."

of older people –and of older men in particular– and present instead the “self as a project” which, as Bryan S. Turner puts it, can contain “plural or multiple or exchangeable selves over time.” (1995: 255)

This moveable presentation of the individual is certainly more coherent with the plurality of experiences of ageing that are developing in the present. Also, it undermines the “narrative problem” which, as Sally Chivers observes, has been associated with having older central characters in modern Hollywood productions. (2011: xv) In the two films analyzed, Manoel de Oliveira and Roger Michell create believable characters that reflect the anxieties, polemics and concerns of many older men in contemporary Western societies. Their process of ageing is depicted as a complex and multi-sequential interlude in which the theatre and the acting world in general help the protagonists perceive the different “masks of ageing” that can be worn or removed. All in all, Oliveira’s and Michell’s films show the spectator that life may still be “but a walking shadow,” to quote Shakespeare again; but the “poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage” has now gained more daring lines, and even has more radical actions to enact before “he is heard no more.” (2007: 249, Act V sc. 5, v. 23-25)

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