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“(Meta)-Theatrical Old Age in Two Contemporary European Films”

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Similar to literature or the performing arts, the cinema and, in particular, the narrative film constitutes a useful artistic and textual source which can throw light on the construction of old age and its (mis)representations. As noted by Sally Chivers in *The Silvering Screen*, the permanence of ageing boomers in commercial cinema has started “changing the ‘face’ of Hollywood.” (2011: xv) Yet, misconceptions of old age or superficial portraits of the process of ageing continue to appear in contemporary manifestations of popular culture, including mainstream films. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to those cinematic studies of old age which highlight the diverse realities of ageing and which, by doing so, especially demystify ageist conceptions. Two contemporary examples of European cinema, Manoel de Oliveira’s *I’m Going Home* (2001) and Roger Michell’s *Venus* (2006), can be regarded as filmic creations that may contribute to the discourse of cultural gerontology –both through the complex portrayal of their male ageing figures, and through their common use of the theatre as a metaphor whereby the process of ageing itself can be both understood and deconstructed. At the same time, these Franco-Portuguese and English productions reproduce the two primary themes which Robert E. Yahnke observed in the depiction of aging in films one decade ago, namely, regeneration and intergeneration, (1992: 293) both of which continue to serve an anti-ageist agenda.

Re- vs De-Generation: *Je rentre à la maison* by Manoel de Oliveira

Manoel de Oliveira's *Je rentre à la maison* offers a perfect case of symbiosis between the ordinary and the theatrical through its septuagenarian protagonist, Gilbert Valence, a highly respected French actor played by the equally reputed theatre and film star Michel Piccoli. As we learn at the beginning of the film, Gilbert's life radically changes when his daughter and son-in-law die in an accident that leaves his little grandson orphaned. The tragedy is announced in the first sequence, right after Gilbert is shown performing in a production of Eugène Ionesco's *Le roi se meurt* [*Exit the King*] and receiving several rounds of applause. This initial combination of personal drama and professional success is gradually reversed throughout the plot, thereby generating the opposite contrast: namely, the one created between the emotional resilience of the main character and his professional decline.

Thus, in the first half of the film, Gilbert's presentation as a talented actor is mainly channeled through his playing emblematic roles such as Shakespeare's Prospero or Ionesco's *Roi*. Even if these characters are powerful symbols of dispossession at a literary level, in the acting world they are signs of prestige. Hence, Oliveira uses these figures in order to reinforce Gilbert's characterization as a highly respected artist who can use his agedness to his own advantage. Beyond the playing arena and on a personal level, Gilbert's getting in and out of different characters also signifies the flexible and ever-fluctuating identity that he is used to taking as a performer, and which becomes the emotional and cultural equipment that helps him cope with the loss of his family. It is in this respect that, as a vital actor approaching his eighties, Gilbert represents the plurality of identities that is implicit in the concept of 'ageing' as it is interpreted by cultural gerontology.

The empowering image of ageing that Oliveira constructs in the first part of the film is underlined by the outdoor sequences that represent Gilbert's everyday life in Paris as a pseudo-anonymous upper-middle-class citizen. In this respect, a sequence in which the actor buys a new pair of shoes becomes especially meaningful. On the one hand, it suggests the positive role that consumerism plays in helping upper-middle-class ageing citizens like Gilbert to attain an individualistic and lively presentation of their Selves; on the other hand, it symbolizes Gilbert's ability to renovate his own identity and 'step into new roles' when necessary. Throughout the first part of the film, then, both theatrical and outdoor sequences depict Gilbert's ageing body as a fully inhabited corporeality that finds satisfaction in both his professional and personal lives.

Yet, in the second part of the film, Gilbert is gradually led to absorbing negative meanings of his age(dness) rather than theatricalizing them or re-acting against them. The turning point is marked by a night sequence in which Gilbert is attacked by a mugger who steals his shoes. Whereas this episode unveils Gilbert's physical frailty as an elderly man, a second event creates a new crack in his self-perception as a senior performer: his agent's insistence on Gilbert's accepting a part in a popular violence-and-sex TV show, which the actor clearly deems unworthy of his career, and which suggests his gradual entrapment in stereotyped images of ageing. Under the increasing pressure of having to retain visibility in the acting market, Gilbert eventually accepts to play a younger man in a rushed replacement for an American film production. The sequence that shows a make-up session for this production significantly portrays the gradual mismatch between Gilbert's inner perception or 'personal age,' and the external image of the social age that is returned to him. The last event that precedes the film's ending transforms Gilbert into what any reputed professional like him would detest: an incompetent actor. After dozing off over his script, having a difficult first rehearsal with

the director, and making several mistakes with his lines during the shooting, Gilbert interrupts the session and leaves the set by simply saying that he is “going home.” A new sequence shows him on the street, still in costume, and going through his text again and again in an obvious state of confusion. Once more, Oliveira cleverly plays with the fine line between the theatrical and the real domains: Gilbert’s decontextualized and faulty ‘street performance’ disempowers him both as an actor and as an elderly man, rendering him a doubly ‘othered’ corporeality. The same fissure between the perceptions of young and old is depicted in the last sequence of the film, when Gilbert finally arrives home and his grandson observes him climb up the stairs to his bedroom with visible effort.

Gilbert’s performative act of returning home is inevitably loaded with at least two kinds of ambiguity, which at the same time elicit questions about psychological and socio-cultural aspects of the ageing process itself and the various forms of agency that they enable. The sequences that present Gilbert’s personal life in a positive light in the first half of the film contradict the negative value that could be attributed to Gilbert’s retirement at the end. In this respect, Gilbert’s ‘return home’ renders him a clear ‘agent’ in control of his own life and professional standards and, consequently, becomes a source of re-generation. Nevertheless, the impact that the episodes of the second half of the film have on the actor’s self-perception and, ultimately, on his own acting skills, suggests the harmful effect that new internalizations of the individual’s age may have on the subject that is classified as ‘old.’ As the film shows, the destructive self-fulfilling prophecy that could explain Gilbert’s professional downfall is firstly channeled through devastating assessments of his old age. Thus, Gilbert’s last performative act ‘to go home’ is also imbued with his newly internalized performance of himself as an old man,

and it seems to follow an imposed script of de-generation that he did not originally intend to play.

An Intergenerational Affair: Roger Michell's *Venus*

The protagonist of *Venus*, a formerly well-known English actor who is interpreted 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 in the last phase of his life has highly reduced his freedom of choice in the acting profession. This is reflected in a sequence in which he and his wife Valerie, played by Vanessa Redgrave, laugh at the *clichéd*, corpse-like characters in which he is often typecast. In general, Maurice's life seems to obey the social pattern of what is expected from him both as an elderly actor and as an old 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; and 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 home and his daily meetings with two elderly friends from the theatre world.

But a central element in the film's plot unveils a different facet of the protagonist's performance of his own age that renovates his sense of agency in the last phase of his life. This is manifested through the peculiar love story that Hanif Kureishi creates in the film's script between Maurice and Jessie, a twenty-year-old girl whose family problems and career aspirations have led her to living a new life in London. Jessie happens to be the great-niece of one of Maurice's actor-friends. Even if Jessie's personality reflects the insecurities, insolence and vanity of an uneducated young girl, Maurice rapidly feels attracted towards her, and finds himself craving her scarce but

honest signs of affection. The difficult but, at the same time, intimate relationship that slowly develops between these two antagonistic characters as they learn to trust each other constitutes the centre of the film. Besides reflecting the challenges of intergenerational relations, Jessie and Maurice's sentimental bond unveils several aspects of late-life masculinity that are all too often represented through *clichéd* portraits of older men in other films, if ever represented at all.

One of the stereotypes that Kureishi and Michell counteract through Maurice's characterization is that of 'the grumpy old man,' which is in a way embodied by his friend Ian, Jessie's great-uncle. Maurice is contrasted with his friend through his capacity to listen to the young girl and take her aspirations seriously. If anybody is really 'grumpy' in this film, it is the young female character that gives title to the narrative, who displays her ungratefulness as if it was part and parcel of her youth. The ageist image of 'the-funny-old-man' figure is also personified by Ian and once again undermined by Maurice's reactions. Despite the sequences that comically present Maurice's curiosity for Jessie's body or his surprise at her thoughts or cruel behaviour, the old actor's elegance and his deeper understanding of the situations that he and Jessie go through in most of the film's scenes supersede any inferiorizing image of his physical or mental 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. Enhanced by the cultural reference to 'Venus,' the unrefined young girl is hence re-constructed by the

old actor as the source of a desire that is more intellectual, or even spiritual, than physically-felt.

Despite the film's deconstruction of *ageist* clichés related to older men through Maurice's respectful and respect-worthy performatives, his new –and last- relationship with a woman is also imbued with the sense of disempowerment that old age inflicts on men at both biological and social levels. This double form of 'otherness' mainly makes its appearance towards the end of the film when Jessie and her boyfriend try to persuade Maurice to go for a walk so that they can use his house to have sex. After wandering aimlessly about the city in a similar way to Gilbert in Oliveira's film, and in an attempt to restore his dignity, Maurice returns sooner than expected to kick the two lovers out. Like Gilbert's, Maurice's rebellion against his loss of manly power and ensuing alienation is also short-lived, as his sudden return leads to a fight that ends up with Jessie's knocking him down. At this point, Maurice's virility seems to be totally undermined through this final act of intergenerational, woman-against-man violence, which truly injures him and confines him to his bed for a few days.

Nonetheless, Kureishi's script creates another performative act for the character that elevates him above his own infirmities and all the adverse forces –of youth, of sex, of incomprehension, even of ignorance– that Jessie impersonates and against which he cannot fight anymore. Maurice's last performative act has a direct effect on the young female figure, as shown in the sequence that follows Jessie's nocturnal escape: when she goes back to the actor's house and the paramedics ask him how he got injured, he uses his acting skills to play the role of the 'forgetful old man,' thus theatrically subverting the expectations that his old body create for both the emergency professionals and Jessie herself. Instead of accusing the girl of having attacked him, 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. Beyond the significance of this twist for the narrative itself, the actor's overcoming the sexual and social impotence of his old body through a theatrical act of love, not only restores his dignity as a person but also counteracts the gradual invisibility and sense of 'otherness' which other characters –the public, his peers and, especially, Jessie- just assumed he had to accept as an old man. Maurice's alienation is hence undermined through the new space he creates for his human agency, even if this is manifested towards the very end of his life.

Even if *Venus* could be classified as a comedy, or even as an alternative 'romantic' comedy if we consider the importance of Maurice's late-life romance in the narrative, it does not elude the inevitable death of its protagonist. Nevertheless, the 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 true friend across age-, gender- and even social-class divides. Faithful to the precepts of the comic genre, therefore, the end of the film emphasizes the permanence of the protagonist's heritage rather than his physical disappearance. More significantly, and before the death of the protagonist itself, Michell shows the protagonist's courageous confrontation with his nearing end and his ensuing bet on life. This is attained once more through the symbolic value of the theatre: right before the fight sequence, Maurice is shown visiting an open-air theatre in which he evokes his past roles, including Hamlet. The invisible continuities that Maurice perceives between his past, his present and his almost inexistent future in that sequence signal the poetic simultaneity of time-frames which can only be perceived towards the end of one's life, as well as the continuous presence of an existential doubt, which is signified by the reference to the Shakespearean tragic hero.

Conclusion

The European films *Je rentre à la maison* and *Venus* exploit and reformulate the classical metaphor of ‘the theatre of life’ through the palimpsestic body of their older-actor figures. By doing so, they encompass two performative narratives of ageing that counteract essentialist perceptions of older people –and of older men in particular– and present instead a dynamic version of the individual that is more coherent with the plurality of experiences of ageing that are developing in the present. Also, they undermine the “narrative problem” which, as Sally Chivers observes in her study, has been associated with having elderly central characters in modern Hollywood productions or commercial cinema. 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. Whether they finally reconcile themselves with the privacy and personalization of the domestic space, or surrender to the dangerous freedom of creating affective relationships beyond age-barriers in an age-obsessed world, Gilbert’s and Maurice’s process of ageing is depicted as a period in which the Self and its various socio-cultural roles can still be interrogated, re-presented and, hence, renovated.

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