

Looking at Reflections of Aging and Elderhood in the Movie Mirror

We will be taking a look at and discussing short clips from five recent feature films that deal with aging related issues. Below are some reflections that may guide our discussion.

A growing number of feature length films are now portraying the experiences of older adulthood. A recent article in *The Guardian* reported: "It is [estimated](#) that around a third of forthcoming Hollywood productions are being made with an eye on older audiences." (Cox, 2012) Indeed, well over 70 major motion pictures portraying something of aging and elderhood have been released in just the past seven years.

Movies have long been a large part of the vast societal mirror in which we see ourselves. As such, we can expect to see in them how our culture perceives and positions the *core* of living in one's later years. As our society becomes more familiar with the growing presence of older adults, the question of how to "age successfully" finds more resonance as well, and is reflected back to us in some of the films showing the experiences of older characters.

What often seems to be missing from many of the reflections on "successful aging" in both gerontological circles and among the general populace is a recognition that elderhood can provide a shift in life perspective and give us the potential for going deeper into the qualities we most value in ourselves and others. For many, it may also be a time of reducing attachments to the material expressions and values that made up the illusory meanings of life. This perspective is not openly attended to in our culture, and is therefore rarely reflected in our feature films. From what I have seen in many of the films that portray the experiences of elderhood, we are still, as a society, trying desperately to value elderhood through the lens of early adulthood. From this perspective, older adulthood is seen as simply a continuation of mid adulthood within the context of deteriorating body parts.

Many films, therefore, simply portray old age as a *threat*. Characters in these films either manage to heroically hold off the threat, or succumb to it as a victim. Very few films explore elderhood as an opportunity for growing into, and relating out of, a deeper sense of self. Part of the reason for this may be the inherent demands of "movieness", USA style. Movies, by standard definition in our culture, want to express a story that has active conflict and resolution; often, the larger the conflict, and the bigger the *action* needed to resolve the conflict, the "better" the movie. Inner growth of character does not play well within this formula.

With these thoughts in mind, we will look at clips from five recent feature films:

- Young at Heart
- Last Vegas
- Hope Springs
- Amour
- Still Mine

Some resources for finding films, and reviews of films, that deal with aging and elderhood:

- ***The Generation Above Me***, a blog by Karen Austin, lists hundreds of films dealing with aging issues.
- ***The Gerontologist***, a journal of the Gerontological Society of America, has regular reviews of both feature films and documentaries that deal with aging related themes.
- ***Itineraries***, an on-line publication of Second Journey has brief descriptions of 50 films for the second half of life. <http://www.secondjourney.org/itin/ISSUES/13-3.htm>
- **Robert Yahnke**, professor emeritus, University of Minnesota, has a website that reviews several films dealing with aging related issues.
<http://www.tc.umn.edu/~ryahnke/filmteach/Circle/2010-Class/2010-class.htm>
- **AARP's Movies for Grownups**: <http://www.aarp.org/entertainment/movies-for-grownups>.
- ***Rotten Tomatoes*** is a good place to find descriptions and brief reviews of films.
<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>

Feel free to contact me with comments or questions on the material covered in this workshop.

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