When Terra Nova Films started over 30 years ago, “aging” was not a big topic in filmmaking. I remember that after making my first film, way back in 1978 (Because Somebody Cares [Vanden Bosch, 1978], a film about volunteers visiting isolated and homebound elderly in Chicago), I was told by those working in the “field of aging” how few good films there were on aging. In 1979, I and the nearly 3 million others my age were still 32 years away from that gratuitously age-defining number—65. Thirty-two years was so far away that we could not imagine our own aging or think about the relevance of aging for our society. We had families to raise and careers to foster. It’s not that aging didn’t matter to me—obviously it did because I was making documentaries about it. But it wasn’t my aging. It was someone else’s. I was certainly engaged as I listened and recorded other persons’ stories about what growing old was like for them, but I was not their old feet in their shoes.

When you multiply that perspective by the 77 million others in the baby-boom generation back then, you see the relevance of the “pig in the python” demographic that was beginning to be talked about 30 years ago. It is more understandable to me now, looking back, that most people in our society at that point were uninterested in aging and certainly not interested in films about aging.

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Here’s an example from personal experience. In 1993, Terra Nova Films embarked on an initiative we called the Silver Images Film Festival. Our goal was to bring to the general public a demythologized awareness of aging by showing films that challenged, or at least put in a more balanced perspective, the old pejorative attitudes about aging. We found the films, selected the best ones with a panel of reviewers, and got public venues to screen them in Chicago. But the viewing public, in any appreciable number, never came out to see them. Other than a few dozen professionals in the field of aging, and their friends, few people showed up—in spite of excellent reviews of the festival in the three major newspapers in Chicago. After several years of effort, Terra Nova stopped this energy-intensive initiative.

I also remember, during the early years of my filmmaking (mid-1980s to mid-1990s), the blank looks I would get when the inevitable “What do you do?” question came up in social situations, and I would say that I made films about aging. “Are you kidding? What a boring topic to make films on!” was what I imagined was behind the blank or quizzical looks. (This was verified one day when I heard my then 14-year-old son’s response to the question “What does your dad do?” “He makes boring films about old people,” he replied.)

Yet, one person’s “boring” is another’s up-close reality. We, the 77 million, are now facing the navigation of the landscape we avoided thinking about for years and years. We are now, by necessity, more attuned to the very personal experiences of our aging selves, our aging friends, and for some, our aging or dying parents. And because millions of us are entering this landscape together, our society as a whole is more aware of the issues aging brings—from the solvency of Social Security and Medicare to the business understanding of how to advertise goods and services to older adults.

Aging awareness, we could say, has “come of age” in our society. It is also coming much more frequently “to a film theater near you.” A society’s attitudes and concerns are often reflected in its feature films. It is not surprising then that in an era of people crossing over into age-land at the rate of 7,000–10,000 a day, many popular films are showing what those travelers experience as they navigate that uneven, uncertain terrain. A recent article in Great Britain’s The Guardian (Cox,
2012) reports that “between 1995 and 2010 the number of over-50-year-old Americans who regularly visited the cinema increased by 68%.” The article goes on to say that largely in response to this demographic shift in filmgoers, “it is estimated that around a third of Hollywood productions are being made with an eye on older audiences.”

Indeed, over the past 5–6 years, there have been a large number of major-release feature length films that deal with aging-related themes and/or characters. (A quick count off the top of my head yielded more than 20 in just the past 6 years.) Many of these films are not, in my opinion, outstanding in quality, but their presence indicates that aging is gaining acceptance, if not appreciation, in public and commercial consciousness. Clint Eastwood, for example, produced Gran Torino (Eastwood, 2008) with himself in the leading role as a crotchety elder thrown into a begrudging relationship with a vulnerable teen-aged neighbor. Away From Her (Polley, 2006) was an attempt (unevenly achieved) at exploring the complexity of the impact of dementia on the intimacy of a long married couple. The Savages (Jenkins, 2007) looked at how two estranged siblings must reconnect when they need to provide care for a father with dementia. Is Anybody There? (Crowley, 2008) is a charming look at the importance of an older man’s friendship with a young boy adrift in the throes of his parents’ rocky relationship. In Get Low (Schneider, 2009), veteran actor Robert Duval’s backwoods Tennesee character purposefully redeems himself in the eyes of the community he has shunned for most of his life. The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (Madden, 2012) shows us a group of older adults who have taken up new lives in India and play off one another’s pessimisms and optimism. A wonderful film from Iran, A Separation (Farhadi, 2011), illuminates the complexities of cultural and class values when a family must care for a father with Alzheimer’s disease. And, finally, one of my favorites from the past few years, Young at Heart (Walker, 2008), a wonderfully engaging feature-length documentary about an older adult chorus that sings vibrant rock songs and wonderfully dispels the myth that old age equals staid. Clearly, the cinema is reflecting themes that a “coming of older age” population is now facing!

Are the attitudes and perceptions about aging in these and other recent films different from those in films produced 20–30 years ago? This question, and many others like it, is what we hope to explore in forthcoming reviews of films that deal with aging-related issues, while also looking at the implications these films have for teaching, research, policy, and practice in a society being jostled by extreme shifts in both demographics and technology.

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“TIS A FAR BETTER THING”: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN GERONTOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Academic Rewind

In the late 1970s, I entered a Kansas State University (KSU) classroom to teach my first course on adult development and aging. Fresh from the USC Andrus Gerontology Center, I was hired by KSU to handle the last two thirds of the human life span—