Trouble With Aging

Film: To Age or Not to Age (96 min)
Sag Harbor Basement Pictures in association with Jeff Lipsky, Distributor
Produced by Miriam Foley and Joseph A. Zock
Released: 2010 (USA)

Film: Trouble with the Curve (111 min)
Warner Brothers, Distributor
Produced by Clint Eastwood and Robert Lorenz
Released: September 2012 (USA)

Film: This Is 40 (133 min)
Universal Pictures, Distributor
Produced by Judd Apatow, Clayton Townsend, and Barry Mendel
Released: December 2012 (USA)

In To Age or Not to Age, independent filmmaker Robert Kane Pappas has put together a fascinating exploration of what current research has discovered about the potential to alter the biological process of aging in human and other animal life forms. The film does a good job of taking a potentially difficult to understand science and making it understandable at a basic level. In the film, several leading researchers talk about how discoveries that were made in the early 1980s are now being refined and brought to clinical trials to test their effectiveness at delaying the onset of major diseases in humans, and thereby extending the human life span. Among the researchers interviewed is Dr. Cynthia Kenyon, molecular biologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who many years ago identified the DAF-2 aging gene in her work with worms and discovered that altering this one gene could double the life span of the worm. Researchers Dr. Nicanor Austriaco and Dr. Brian Kennedy talk about their involvement in the discovery of the SIR2 gene in yeast cells when they were working at the Guarente Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the subsequent research that has borne out Dr. Leonard Guarente’s hypothesis that these genes are key regulators in the life-extending response to caloric restriction in an organism.

New research on stem cells and the potential for maintaining cellular vigor and youth via reintroduced pluripotent stem cells are also briefly covered in the film. So too is a discussion of the Ashkenazi study of several hundred centenarians that points to the genetic influence on longevity and to the mutation in the telomerase genes of these centenarians. In short, the film is a lengthy tour of much of the latest research on the potential for expanding the human life span through biomedical means.

Pappas also talks with Aubrey de Grey, a biomedical gerontologist based in Cambridge, United Kingdom, who is outspoken in his belief that much of the knowledge needed to develop actual biomedical strategies for extending human life already exists. de Grey posits that with additional future regenerative medicine discoveries, an accelerated path of life extension will ultimately allow humans to benefit from what he playfully calls the “longevity escape velocity.” That is, once the first genetic and molecular advances enable a modest amount of life extension to happen, future discoveries will happen more quickly so that in his words, “we will stay ahead of the game,” and for some, life could go on indefinitely. In contrast, many of the scientists in this film take a much more cautionary approach. They talk about the potential of adding 15%–20% to the healthy human life span, and play down de Grey’s “virtual immortality” scenario as based not on science but on “whimsy.” Kenyon, though, ranks the new discoveries of genes that regulate longevity, with the discovery of DNA, and she sportively spins a scenario of 30 year olds unsuspectingly dating 90 year olds, once healthy life extension preserves our youthfulness for several additional years.

The film also traces the lengthy research process that usually starts with government-funded research and then moves into the private sector via investor-funded development in the hopes of producing a patentable product that will add years of healthy human life by delaying the onset of major diseases. Many of the researchers allude to the lack of new government funding for this kind of research and the dampening effect of this shortfall on new discoveries in this field.

Throughout the film, interviews with researchers are interspersed with lighthearted vignettes that help viewers digest and interpret the scientific premises. This variety, along with several comments from lay individuals reflecting on the ramifications of life extension, keeps the film nicely balanced between scientific details about biological aging processes and the human relevance of this research.
Pappas closes the film by saying that after several years of working on this film, he has come to think that the new discoveries of genetic alteration that affect longevity represent simply the first generation in what may become a biomedical revolution.

Resisting the ill effects of aging seems to be fairly universal, so the allure of a science that seeks to add healthy years to our life span is understandable. In the mean time, for some there is cosmetic surgery. In a postscript to the film, we are told that one of the aforementioned lay commentators (a woman who opined that “this country’s so obsessed with aging and holding on...”) underwent a surgical facelift soon after the filming.

At 96 min, the film is quite long and would benefit from some editing and from adding topical chaptering to facilitate its use in an educational setting. That said, this film, or at least portions of it, would be an effective opening to a discussion around the core issues, both biological and social, that are involved in the potential of extending the human life span.

The recent feature film, Trouble with the Curve, portrays a different concern with the effects of aging. An alternative title for this film could have been Trouble with Aging. Clint Eastwood plays a crusty ill-tempered oldster (just as he did a few years ago in Gran Torino). Eastwood’s character, Gus Lobel, is in danger of losing his position as a long-revered baseball scout because of macular degeneration, and because he still relies on old ways of scouting as opposed to computer-generated stats. Adding this circumstantial pressure to his already dour temperament puts him in an even fouler mood throughout most of the film. (When an acquaintance asks “What crawled up your ass?” Gus simply responds, “Old age.”) When Gus’ thirtysomething daughter, Mickey (Amy Adams), tries to help him, she is initially rebuffed, and we learn more about their troubled relationship and its roots in a past of misguided decisions and lack of communication on Gus’ part.

All of these issues are eventually resolved in typical movie shorthand style. The effects of the macular degeneration are not referred to again as the film fades into the sunset of resolution. As the mildly entertaining plot unfolds, we are treated to a particularly expressive disgruntlement over the deleterious effects of aging. Eastwood’s character, however, does undergo some maturation and mellowing as the story develops one of the strong points of the film. As more mainstream films attempt to deal with how humans handle their aging, the film industry may need to amend its definition of happy endings. The most frequent portrayal of a filmic happy ending in regard to aging is for the characters to defy and overcome the adjustments that aging requires, as in Trouble with the Curve. This approach will never be able to go further into the reality of what aging can bring. It is fine to heroize those who live long and strong, but I am waiting for the development of films that also show heroic acceptance of the final and more difficult processes of aging. (The much acclaimed new film, Amour, by Austrian director, Michael Haneke, moves in this direction. I plan to review it in an upcoming issue.)

What is new, in the mainstream movie world, is a film that recognizes the implications of aging for middle agers—something that has largely gone unaddressed in most films that portray the lives and experiences of this age group. In the recently released, This Is 40, we are shown a week in the lives of Pete (Paul Rudd) and Debbie (Leslie Mann) who are both turning 40. Debbie’s method of dealing with this is flat-out denial, whereas Pete is fine with a party for himself. The film is mostly an overbearing romp through the lives of this couple prior to the birthday party for Pete. Along the way we meet Pete’s father, Larry (Albert Brooks) who is still chagrined at becoming the father of triplets at age sixtysomething and who is leaning on Pete for financial assistance to make ends meet with his young family. We also meet Debbie’s father, Oliver (John Lithgow), who has a somewhat estranged relationship with her. The tenuous relationships with both parents come to a disastrous climax at Pete’s party, when conversations unravel into unguarded accusations.

In the swirl of puerile humor that makes up most of this film, there is an undertow of panicky concern over time running out and over the feared effects of aging on the body. The film does have its moments as a humorous commentary on our culture’s paranoia about growing older. If you can endure the onslaught of over the top repetitious scenes contrived for their comedy, you will see some interesting portrayals of the fourtsomething generation’s growing attention to their own upcoming horizon of aging.

Jim Vanden Bosch, MA
Terra Nova Films, Inc.
9848 S.Winchester Ave.
Chicago, IL 60643
E-mail: jvb@terranova.org

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