From Taboo Into Projected Film Light

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Film: *Still Mine* (102 min)
Mongrel Media, Distributor
Produced by Jody Colero, Avi Federgreen, & Tamara Deverell
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The first time film reviews appeared in this journal was in the December 1976 issue. Dr. Richard Davis introduced the concept of including reviews of audiovisuals about aging-related issues with these words:

As recently as 7 years ago a section on media would not have been included in *The Gerontologist*. There would have been very little to write about. That this subject now demands attention reflects some interesting developments in our society. These developments may be the result of the impact of the work of gerontologists as well as the gradual shifting in demographics with attendant policy implications in the field of mass media.

In the late 1960s I asked decision-makers in the film and television industry in Hollywood why so little attention was paid to older audiences, and how older people were depicted in the audio-visual panorama created for mass consumption. The answers were predictable: older people are not a commercial interest; they don’t spend any money; older people seldom appear because they are not interesting subjects for comedy or drama; they don’t “do anything.”

While this may over-simplify some of the responses, nevertheless, it fairly reflects a contention prevalent at that time that aging as subject matter was taboo for the mass media. (Davis, 1976, p. 556)

It has taken a long time for that taboo to fade in the world of feature films. After the Audiovisual Reviews section was started in *The Gerontologist* back in 1976, most of the reviews were of *educational* films and eventually, videos. These films and videos were the first (ahead of mainstream feature films) to be produced in response to the growing field of gerontology, and in response to the growing awareness of aging-related issues by professionals in the social service and health care fields. But these films were rarely seen, nor marketed to, the general public.

Only in the last 10 years has the production of mainstream *feature films* that reflect some aspect of elderhood become more prevalent in the United States and Canada. Prior to the turn of the current century, there was only an occasional such film produced in the United States (Europe seemed to be less taboo-ish about films dealing with later life issues).

When I watch some of these films now, I am struck by how stilted many of them seem. Many of these films were based on plays, and the play-like dialogue and pacing seem to cross over into the films. I am more enthusiastic about many recently produced films that avoid this stiff and unnatural pacing.

One such new film, *Still Mine*, takes us into the lives of Craig and Irene Morrison as they face the gradual loss of Irene’s short-term memory (the comments that follow are elaborated from a review I did of this film for *Itineraries*, an online publication of Second Journey; Vanden Bosch, 2013b). Played by James Cromwell and Genevieve Bujold, the couple still lives in their well-worn two-story farmhouse in New Brunswick. Near the beginning of the film we see evidences of Irene’s short-term memory slipping. In response to this, Craig (at 87 years of age) decides to use his long-honed carpentry skills to build them a new smaller single story house that will better accommodate Irene’s slowly deteriorating condition. Visually, the film is open and bright, with many of its scenes shot outside. The characters are also openhearted and honest—even when they are in disagreement with
each other. (Both Cromwell and Bujold do a fine job of portraying an older rural Canadian couple.)

In the process of building the house, Craig runs afoul of a provincial building inspector by not always adhering to the minutia of the building codes, even though the lumber and the structural soundness of the house are beyond dispute. This conflict builds throughout the film and threatens the finishing of the house, even as Irene’s condition worsens. Craig and Irene’s grown children also weigh in with their concerns over what is happening. They angst together over whether to try to convince Craig to follow a different course in meeting Irene’s needs. The film is refreshingly multidimensional in how it shows this couple facing the challenges of memory loss. In so many mainstream films, dementia is misunderstood and portrayed as a condition that destroys one’s personhood. In Still Mine, the focus is on the more gradual decline that affects Irene’s short-term memory, not her personhood. But neither is the reality of the decline glossed over. In one scene, Craig and Irene are lying in bed together and Irene says “What if I forget everything?” Craig responds, after a few seconds to take in this potential reality, “You’ll still be my Irene.” Craig is not portrayed without his faults. He is often brusque and prone to angry outbursts. Yet, he recognizes these lapses and seeks forgiveness for them. In a climactic scene, Irene resists going into the house at night to go to bed. Craig, after repeatedly cajoling her, finally physically drags her up the steps and into the house, while she screams in protest. Later that night she gets up out of bed, trips on a shoe, and breaks her hip. In retelling the event to his children, Craig is remorseful. “You don’t just drag somebody,” he says.

Still Mine presents a wonderful counterpoint to another recent film, Amour (reviewed in this journal, Vanden Bosch, 2013a). Unlike the couple in Amour who are also dealing with a severe decline in health, Craig and Irene are not isolated as they face the loss of Irene’s cognitive abilities. While Craig is an independent and resourceful person, he also has a supportive family and community to help him take on the increased workload when Irene’s health is faltering. One of the couple’s friends, for example, insists on bringing a prepared meal for Craig and Irene once a week. Two of Craig and Irene’s adult children are also at hand, and provide help—when Craig will accept it. The film is infused with a sense of family and community connection that is missing from Amour.

After breaking her hip, Irene needs an extended stay in a rehab facility. This lengthy separation is painful for both Irene and Craig, especially for Irene, because she often forgets why she needs to be there. Craig accepts the news of the need for Irene to be in the facility for 2 months with stoic grace. “Irene and I have been married for 61 years and have never been apart for more than a few days at a time. But if this is what is necessary, well then that’s just the way it will have to be.”

Two themes that reverberate throughout this film are the attachment to home, and the balance of independence/dependence needed to stay at home when one’s strength begins to wane. Craig is portrayed as a very independent and strong-willed man who still has the vitality and ability to build a new house. He also knows when he must accept outside help for Irene and himself. This balancing act is crucial to successful aging. Knowing when to resist the changes aging inevitably brings, and knowing when to accept them is what graceful aging is all about. Both Craig and Irene are shown struggling realistically and deeply with these issues.

Eventually, Craig finishes the new house, and Irene comes home. Still Mine is based on a true story. There was a real-life Craig Morrison who was harassed and brought to court many times during a 2-year period by the provincial building inspectors. In 2010, they ultimately petitioned that the court forcibly remove Craig and Irene from their new house, that the house be bulldozed, and that Mr. Morrison be found in contempt of court and imprisoned. Fortunately, the presiding Justice disagreed, saying that he was not going to send a 91-year-old man to jail and his wife to a nursing home.

Still Mine is a wonderful example of sensitive filmmaking that enables the general public to see elderhood in a multidimensional way rather than in the two dimensional stereotypical way that has dominated feature films and other mass consumption media in the past. Are we beginning to turn a corner here?

References

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