Filming “Successful Aging”

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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 of elderhood as a shift in life perspective and an ultimate coming to terms with divestment in preparation for leaving this life form. 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 earlier 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 with this formula.

With these thoughts in mind I have selected five recent films to briefly review in regard to how they portray the more inward and transcendent aspects of successful aging. The Stone Angel (Skogland, 2007), based on the novel of the same name by Canadian author, Margaret Laurence, takes us on a life review through the eyes and memories of its main character, 90 year old Hagar Shipley (Ellen Burstyn). Faced with undefined health issues, she fiercely resists the attempts of her son and his wife to move her into a nursing home. At one point she escapes their badgering by boarding a bus and traveling to a deteriorated summer cottage that holds many memories from her earlier years. (These scenes are reminiscent of another film with many of the same themes, A Trip to Bountiful (Masterson, 1985) Throughout the film, flashbacks to Hagar’s earlier life give us glimpses of her character and the formative events that defined her life’s journey. Faced with an awareness of her own impending death, she goes through the process of recalling and then transcend the regrets she carries from troubled relationships with her father, her husband and her two sons.

While the film covers a long traverse of time and events, it manages to weave these events into a meaningful précis of her life, and it concludes with a scene where she has clearly found grace and forgiveness—of herself and those she has loved. The Stone Angel is a good example of the inner work that is often catalyzed and achieved by living in the state of elderhood.

Unfinished Song (Williams, 2012) presents us with another story of transformation—this time, that of a grumpy old man. Early in the film, Marion (Vanessa Redgrave) and her husband, Arthur (Terence Stamp), get the news that Marion’s cancer has returned and there is little to stop it. Marion has been part of an older adult singing group, and she insists on continuing to perform with them. Arthur, seemingly crotchety and gruff by nature, doesn’t think much of the group, but heeding Marion’s wishes he helps her to stay involved in it. The film’s portrayal of the
singing group, led by a perky young woman, borders on campy and affected, but it does provide a context within which to play out the ensuing changes in Arthur’s character. Marion faces her death with courage and acceptance, but Arthur has a much harder time dealing with it. After her death, he becomes reclusive. He also refuses to communicate with his adult son, with whom he has apparently had a long standing feud. (We never learn why; it is one of the weaknesses in the film.) Eventually though, the choir’s young director reaches through Arthur’s detachment and invites him to take Marion’s place in the group as they practice for the finals in a choral competition. Arthur resists at first, but then gradually comes out of his isolation through this association with the young director and the group. The film ends on a strong and vibrant note when Arthur, having overcome his reticence, sings a moving solo as part of the choral competition. Overall, Unfinished Song feels overplayed and somewhat formulaic, but it is watchable as at least an attempted example of the transformative process that may be achieved as part of later life.

Another recent film, All Together (Robelin, 2011), could have explored a deeper sense of elderhood, but ends up far away from saying anything meaningful. The premise of the film has potential; five older longtime friends move into one house in order to support each other in the face of a variety of health issues. The film starts off well enough as it introduces the five characters and what they are facing. It then half heartedly tries to focus on the deeper questions of their adjusting to the realities of physical and mental decline, but it doesn’t go very deep. Instead, it quickly degenerates into an insensitive comedic farce that puts sex in the forefront along with the discovery of earlier secret affairs that one of the friends had with two of the others. There is very little character development in this film. The characters and the issues they confront skip over the surface like a well thrown stone over a pond, and the film ultimately sputters to a ridiculous close.

In the film, Last Vegas (Turteltaub, 2013), four older estranged friends just happen to fall for the same silky woman in Vegas. Rarely have I seen such a clumsily executed plot or heard such worn out dialogue as in this belabored excuse for a film. Does this film provide a reflection of successful aging? On its glossy surface, apparently yes; looking just beneath that surface, no.

By far one of the best films I have seen that demonstrates “successful aging” is the little known Canadian film, Still Mine (McGowan, 2013). In my earlier review of this film (Vanden Bosch, 2013), I commented that the delicate balance of “knowing when to resist the changes aging inevitably brings, and knowing when to accept them” is what this film so beautifully illustrates. Its main characters must navigate the difficult terrain of dealing with memory loss, but they do so with courage, vitality, love and graceful acceptance. They also have the support of family and friends. Still Mine is a wonderful counterpoint to the dark and cloistered portrait of physical, mental and spiritual deterioration presented in the film, Amour (Haneke, 2012)—a striking and thought provoking film that is about the very opposite of successful and graceful aging.

References


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