

Elder Kitsch: The Development of a Comedic and Cultural Trope in Postwar America

by

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Dedication

For my family

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Introduction

In May of 1902, Edison Manufacturing Company released a film entitled *Naughty Grandpa and the Field Glass*. The AFI catalog description of the film reads:

Grandpa is absorbed in a daily paper, near an open window. A spoony bicycle couple dismount down the lane to re-arrange a portion of the lady's toilet and attract the old gentleman's attention. His somewhat impaired eyesight causes him to resort to his trusty field glass in order to better watch the operation. A very apparent improvement in the view affects the old gentleman to such a degree that it is not approved of by his elderly spouse, who appears on the scene at the time and proceeds to demolish the field glass, thus putting an abrupt end to the old gentleman's investigations.¹

This film represents what is one of the earliest American comedies to derive humor from the very simple representation of an elder figure behaving in a way or expressing thoughts that are the province of a younger person. “Grandpa” here, in leering at the young woman and her lover and expressing some sense of titillation at the sight, is behaving as a “dirty old man,” a term reserved for an older man whose interest in the opposite sex is deemed inappropriate to his age. In keeping with the mores of the time, the film shows Grandpa promptly punished for this inappropriate behavior (and, with the destruction of the binoculars, prevented from engaging in it again). Thus proper social order is reasserted.

¹“Naughty Grandpa and the Field Glass,” *American Film Institute Catalog of Feature Films*. <afi.chadwyck.co.uk/home>

As the Edison film demonstrates, the sight of an older person behaving in the manner of a younger person, operating outside of a socially approved role, has long been considered humorous. But in recent decades, the comedic representation of elder figures speaking and behaving like young people has become far more elaborately developed and prominent, essentially becoming a standard trope frequently employed in American film, television, and advertising. The trope was first extensively exploited by comedian George Burns in the 1970s as he forged a popular second act in his career playing a funny old man on popular youth-oriented programming like *The Muppet Show* and eventually in his own starring roles in films like *Oh, God!* (Carl Reiner, 1977) and *18 Again!* (Paul Flaherty, 1988). Recent examples of the phenomenon include the popular mascot of the Six Flags amusement park chain, an old man in a tuxedo (in actuality, a young dancer in “old man” make-up) who dances frenetically to party music, acting as a piper who leads young people to the amusement park. An ad for Taco Bell that aired during the 2013 Super Bowl features a group of seniors sneaking out of their retirement home at the night to attend a rave, get tattoos, and turn doughnuts in an empty parking lot, all scored to the pop anthem “We Are Young.” In 2012, a television series called *Betty White’s Off Their Rockers* began airing in primetime on NBC. Hosted by Betty White, the show is a hidden camera program in which senior citizens play pranks on unsuspecting young people.

Such representations have become commonplace in contemporary popular culture, but what happened between Edison and George Burns to allow a program like *Off Their Rockers* to be not only utterly unremarkable but also exist as a popular

primetime hit? Why is such behavior no longer beaten back into propriety, as it was in *Naughty Grandpa and the Field Glass*, and is instead celebrated with applause, laughter, and continuous replication? This project aims to answer these questions by building a history of the media representations, industrial changes, and sociocultural shifts that contributed to the development of this particular comedic and cultural trope.

Project Overview

This project examines the concept and function of elders in American culture during the post-WWII years and how this is reflective of and reinforced by visual representations in film and television that depict elders as comical figures. I argue that this ultimately leads to a new “tradition” of representation: the popular comedic trope familiar through the last several decades that I’m terming “elder kitsch.” This comedic trope presents elder figures as a source of amusement, juxtaposing their obviously aged physical appearance with youthful subjects, behavior, and statements. Such comedic presentations have become pervasive in popular culture, employed to advertise anything from soft drinks to candy bars to amusement parks. They have also provided second comings in the careers of aged stars such as the icons of elder kitsch, George Burns and Betty White. This project traces the history of this phenomenon, popularized in its modern form due to a confluence of factors in film and television production of the early postwar years, as well as historical, political, and cultural changes of that period. It also considers what it is about this particular phenomenon that has made it so peculiarly

enduring and explores the implications of elder kitsch as a primary popular representation of an ever-increasing portion of the American public.

My main research questions are twofold. First, I aim to examine when and why this particular trope came about. In focusing on an historical approach, I hope to illuminate the context that provided fertile ground for this phenomenon and to make a convincing case that such representation could only have flourished so well in the America that emerged at the end of World War II. The causal factors that I've identified as leading to this change and its attendant visual representation include social and political factors such as the implementation of Social Security, postwar migration and suburbanization, and the resultant shift in household membership. There are also related cultural factors including generational conflict between pre-war and postwar generations and a wealth of media idealizing domestication, distinct gender roles, and the nuclear family. Industrial factors also play a role, including the post-Paramount Decree restructuring of the film industry, the growth and establishment of the television industry, and changing approaches to advertising including the identification and targeting of newly conceptualized youth markets. Economic influences aligned with these industrial factors also include the changing economic means of nuclear family units and elder Americans during the postwar years and a renewed age of consumerism.

Second, I will examine what these representations signified during the postwar period. Moreover, what is it about elder kitsch that continues to attract us as such a pervasive representation? I will take a theoretical approach in unpacking these concerns, drawing on theories of comedy and genre as a means of making sense of elder kitsch

itself as both an historical and enduring cultural phenomenon. To do so, I will also closely analyze a number of period texts that circulate the predecessors of elder kitsch representations including films, television programs, and commercials. In compiling and analyzing such texts, I hope to create a micro-history of this particular visual trope's development during the postwar years and its significance within a broader cultural history. I also work, it should be noted, with a necessarily fluid concept of "aging," looking at a variety of representations—from subjects clearly marked as "elder" (at least one generation removed from other adults in a given text) to those facing encroaching late middle-age in Hollywood film of the 1950s, all of which further the growing division between "young" and "old" and emphasize generational conflict during the rise of a youth-centric American popular culture. Throughout, the visibly aged bodies and faces of these subjects remain central to my analysis, which examines the symbolic importance of those marked as "old" within a given text as well as to a viewing audience.

My project contributes to film and media studies scholarship in that it examines a specific phenomenon that has yet to be explored in any depth and represents an attempt at a new conceptual framework, one that demonstrates a way in which scholars might use "age" as a socio-cultural category of analysis and criticism. Though it is one of the defining factors of lived experience and one's perceptions of self and others, age to this point has been studied very little within a field that has done so much to consider other similarly defining concepts such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. My project, therefore, aims to open up discussion of ways in which age can be used as a lens to clarify our understanding of our cultural world and its media products.

While fully acknowledging the multi-disciplinary nature of this project, my approach primarily is to examine the phenomenon's development in film and television. The topic of age in society is, of course, important to other disciplines such as sociology, history, gerontology, women's studies, cultural studies, and communication, and my hope is that this project may be useful not only as a means to construct a conceptual framework within film and media studies but also as an example of how the interests of our field resonate beyond its borders to offer, in Richard Maltby's words (in another context), a way in which film studies can "matter."

So, how could this project resonate or matter? Age is a particularly tricky concept in that it affects each and every one of us in quite different ways throughout our lives. It is a constant factor in understanding our own conceptions of self as well as our relationships with others. Aging studies is an area of research that has done much to cross the boundaries between scholarly inquiry and general interest, recognizing the often times quite personal and affective aspects of the topic. It is my hope that my project ultimately contributes to that field and also presents scholarly material and analysis in a manner that can connect with and be of interest to a general readership. It is my personal belief that age (moving beyond certain conceptions of obvious interest to specific demographics such as "ageism" or "old age") has been under-discussed in the popular cultural sphere, certainly relative to how much of an effect age has on our experience and thinking. I argue that the phenomenon of elder kitsch itself is partly responsible for this lack of discussion. By putting together a project focused on what can be seen as both an

appealing and appalling tradition of representation that we have come to take for granted, it is an ideal jumping off point for further inquiry and discussion.

Review of Literature

Neither the phenomenon of elder kitsch nor a significant analysis of the representations of aging in comedy have been addressed adequately thus far within the field of film studies. Drawing from other related subjects of analysis, as well as from bodies of literature associated with television and communication studies, cultural studies, social history, and aging studies, I have pieced together a collection of theoretical and methodological insights to form an appropriate foundation for this project. In this sense, my project is not only multidisciplinary in its appeal but also in its approach. Due to the fact that I am drawing material from several disciplines, I have limited this review of literature to two field-specific categories of film and television. I have not included aging studies as a separate category since it is essentially an interdisciplinary grouping of scholarly work, appearing within each of the other categories to some extent. Aging studies work outside of these categories, perhaps better categorized within gerontology and public policy analyses, has certainly played an important role in this project, in terms of data and terminology, but it is supplemental to the foundational works from which I have drawn.

Film Studies

Surprisingly little has been published within film studies that deals directly with issues of aging. Until quite recently, such work has been limited to a handful of essays

and one book, Karen M. Stoddard's *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* (1983).² Stoddard looks at Hollywood depictions of middle aged and elderly women from the 1930s to the early 1980s. She examines a number of reoccurring stereotypes (the witch, saintly mother, overbearing mother) through a feminist lens, which places her in line with Molly Haskell and Majorie Rosen, and her study operates very much as a companion to these.

In the 1990s, a number of aging studies books exploring humanistic perspectives (predominately literature-based, though occasionally including analysis of films) were published in Britain and the United States. While such writing tends to use filmic examples to further underscore arguments about literary or other cultural representations, there are occasional works focused entirely on film. An example is Merry G. Perry's "Animated Gerontophobia: Ageism, Sexism, and the Disney Villainess," which employs much of the same feminist theorizing from Stoddard's work to a different body of representations.³ Susan J. Ferguson's "The Old Maid Stereotype in American Film, 1938 To 1965" from *Film & History* (1991) is a similar cataloging of representations from a (slightly more film studies-based) feminist theoretical perspective.⁴ While such works are insightful and cover important ground, they are more useful perhaps as additions to the

² Karen M.,Stoddard. *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983).

³ Merry G. Perry. "Animated Gerontophobia: Ageism, Sexism, and the Disney Villainess," in *Aging and Identity: A Humanities Perspective*, eds. Sara M. Deats and Lagretta Lenker (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 201-212.

⁴ Susan J. Ferguson. "The Old Maid Stereotype in American Film, 1938 To 1965," *Film & History* 21:4 (Dec, 1991): 144.

large existing body of gender- and sexuality-focused film studies than as the sole representations of age-focused work in our field.

Recently, there have been attempts to fill the gap left by this overlooked topic in film studies. One scholarly work focusing solely on cinematic aging is Amir Cohen-Shalev's *Visions of Aging: Images of the Elderly in Film* (2009).⁵ In this monograph, Cohen-Shalev examines both the "late style" of aging filmmakers and films in which aging is a predominant subject, regardless of the filmmaker's own age. Focusing on classic films by "canonical" filmmakers such as *Wild Strawberries* (Bergman, 1957) and more contemporary works like *Waking Ned Devine* (Jones, 1998), Cohen-Shalev considers themes about aging and the elderly through textual analysis with an auteurist lens.

Amelia DeFalco's *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (2010) follows in the 1990s tradition of humanistic aging studies that include considerations of film without looking at that medium exclusively or situating analyses within a film-specific context.⁶ DeFalco uses theories of the uncanny to look at contemporary literary and filmic portrayals of old age. Through narrative analysis, DeFalco argues that such texts reveal the experience of aging as a process in which one's body and self become uncanny. She presents this as an especially modern conception of identity as multiple and shifting, and as a representation of conceiving our own lives as narrative trajectories, influenced in no small part by the literary and filmic narratives dominant in our culture.

⁵ Amir Cohen-Shalev. *Visions of Aging: Images of the Elderly in Film* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2009).

⁶ Amelia DeFalco. *Uncanny Subjects: Aging in Contemporary Narrative* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010).

Though the majority of texts examined by DeFalco are literary works, she does consider a handful of films, including the American pictures *Opening Night* (John Cassavetes, 1977) and *Requiem for a Dream* (Darren Aronofsky, 2000), as well as the Canadian film *The Company of Strangers* (Cynthia Scott, 1990) and the British film *Iris* (Richard Eyre, 2001). DeFalco's consideration of how this sense of the aging body as uncanny contributes to a cultural treatment of the aging as "different" and to be feared has certainly been influential on my own arguments about the promotion of difference and dehumanization by elder kitsch.

Drawing heavily from disability studies, gerontology, and cultural studies, Sally Chivers's *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (2011)⁷ examines several high-profile films about aging and the aged, such as *Iris* (Richard Eyre, 2001), *Away From Her* (Sarah Polley, 2006), and *The Savages* (Tamara Jenkins, 2007). In reading these films, Chivers demonstrates the ways in which Hollywood repeatedly conflates representations of aging with representations of disability, presenting aging itself as the ultimate of disabilities, something of a horror. Chivers also considers the impact of aging on stars like Melanie Griffith and Harrison Ford, and devotes an entire chapter to the later careers of Clint Eastwood and Jack Nicholson. Her analysis touches on the double-standard applied to aging actresses in Hollywood, as opposed to aging male stars and she examines insightfully the peculiar ways in which Hollywood has created a space onscreen in recent years for aging action stars. While an early chapter examines *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

⁷ Sally Chivers. *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

(Robert Aldrich, 1962) as early representations in which aging (the aging woman, in particular) is conflated with mental and physical disability, the book's focus is firmly on the contemporary period and films of the 2000s. The book is very much an argument against negative portrayals of disability onscreen, here attaching disability to age, and an analysis of the ways in which recent films have sent mixed-messages, both challenging and reinforcing such biases. Chivers's analysis of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* has been especially useful to my own reading of this same film in Chapter 4 of this project and her ideas over all, surrounding the conflation of age with disability and the pathologizing of old age, have certainly influenced my own thinking.

The strength of these books is, most simply, that they have opened the conversation around age and cinema. Some of the "greatest hits" of elders on screen (works by Bergman, Ozu, and so on) that immediately come to mind for most readers are represented and discussed. Additionally, key theoretical arguments related to gender and sexuality, identity, and mortality are pursued – crucial foundational work for any aging study to build upon. What is lacking so far is a study that examines representations of aging on films specific to Hollywood cinema in a explicit time period or even significant consideration of films which pre-date the 1980s. My project begins to sketch out a cultural history of old age in postwar film, historicizing the representations and tracing shifts, with greatest attention paid to the immediate postwar years. Additionally, while previous works have understandably concentrated on films in which aging and the elderly are a major theme, my project often deals with films in which aging is tangential to the main story or characters and remains unexamined. In this sense, I will be examining not

only how our media products represent aging when they are setting out to say something about it, but also how aging is represented when it is taken for granted and unexplored, certainly more common representations than the former.

Age in terms of audience, particularly juvenile audiences, has been a stronger subject of interest in film studies. In many cases this work has been historical and industrial, such as those surrounding the famous Payne Fund studies or charting the various attempts to shield young audiences, such as different iterations of the production code and local forms of concerned censorship. One the best works of this type is an essay by Richard deCordova, included in the recent collection, *Looking Past the Screen*.⁸ deCordova pieces together, from a variety of primary source materials, a narrative of the construction of “childhood” and child audiences through social movements of the 1920s, which eventually led to industry and exhibitor collaboration in the creation of Saturday children’s matinees. He attempts, in miniature, to address multiple issues regarding age, including the social construction of an age group, industry construction of a demographic, reform movements of the period, and a general context of life stages in a moment of cultural redefinition.

Other recent historical works about audiences, social movements and cinema that involve age as a factor include Susan Ohmer’s *George Gallup in Hollywood* (2006) and Eric Smoodin’s *Regarding Frank Capra* (2004). Ohmer traces the history of Hollywood studios employing Gallup pollsters in the 1930s and 1940s in an attempt to better

⁸ Richard deCordova. “Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, The Hays Office, and Saturday Matinees” in *Looking Past the Screen: Case Studies in American Film History and Method*, eds. Jon Lewis and Eric Smooden (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 229-245.

understand their potential audiences and such audience's supposed tastes.⁹ Ohmer's research presents some of the strongest evidence related to Hollywood making overt age-based (and other demographic) distinctions and attempting to use data related to this to tailor their output. Additionally, Ohmer's work presents a look at public opinion about social issues of the period and how that was presented to Hollywood executives. Eric Smoodin's study of Frank Capra's films in non-traditional/theatrical settings works in a similar way.¹⁰ Like deCordova, Smoodin uses a range of primary sources to construct a history and, like Ohmer, sheds light on contemporary audience's reactions to films, ultimately making an argument for the role such responses played in Capra's work. While Smoodin looks at how Capra's films served as war propaganda, prison entertainment, and as case studies for how foreign censorship of US films was enacted, what is most relevant to my project is his examination of Capra's work in juvenile education films in the 1950s and his study of a collection of high school students written responses to *It Happened One Night*. In each case, he provides insight into the relationship of different aged publics to Hollywood products during periods in which we typically think of Hollywood as speaking always to one mainstream, all-encompassing public. This is another work that recovers public response to popular culture and reinstates it as an integral part of film history.

The age-related scholarship in film studies that has been perhaps the most instructive for my project is work that has been done on studying teen and adolescent

⁹ Susan Ohmer. *George Gallup in Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Eric Smoodin. *Regarding Frank Capra: Audience, Celebrity, and American Film Studies, 1930-1960* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

audiences and films. In particular, there are two works that stand out as especially useful. Thomas Doherty's *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (1988) presents the history of a phenomenon nearly the opposite of my own.¹¹ In this book Doherty traces how the "teenpic" started out as a small genre of exploitation pictures designed to appeal to a growing segment of the marketplace (baby boomer teens with copious leisure time and disposable income) and came to be a dominant force in postwar American cinema. While much of Doherty's book is devoted to the examination and delineation of different teenpic subgenres, the early sections of *Teenagers and Teenpics* provide an informative history of the function of age in the cinematic marketplace.

Eric Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (1999) is a very different work from Doherty's, though it covers some of the same material in its exploration of exploitation films in the 1950s.¹² Schaefer does, however, provide a strong example of writing a history of niche audiences, subjects and films, while also placing this firmly within a detailed social and cultural context. Much of the discourse surrounding the films that Schaefer writes about, particularly hygiene films and drug films, becomes invariably generational, demonstrating not only the changing culture of the postwar years through reception but also illuminating the complexity of viewpoints embodied by different age groups of the time.

¹¹ Thomas Doherty. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

¹² Eric Schaefer. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

The strength of these works on juvenile cinema and audiences is that they have done strong historical work and established age as a legitimate and important aspect of our understanding of American cinema. They also provide excellent models of how to explore something as overwhelmingly broad as aging in ways that are specific and can be documented. My project expands the concept of age in American cinema to include elders, whose representations are no less important than those of youth in the postwar period. I argue that, if we accept media representations and interactions with youth as contributing to how “youth” is defined and understood within our culture, then we must do the same with media conceptions of elders.

Television

While there are a number of articles and books regarding the representation of elder figures on television, they are primarily sociological in their orientation and prescriptive in nature. A book of this type that I found to be particularly useful is *TV's Image of the Elderly: A Practical Guide for Change* (1983).¹³ This text is divided into two parts, with the second portion devoted to the cause of getting more elders on television and improving their public image. Chapters in this section cover topics such as “Getting a Show of Your Own,” “Guest Appearances: Strategies and Opportunities” and “Advocating Your Rights to the Airwaves.” Although dated, the first portion of the book does offer some information of value, including numerous statistics and surveys about the appearances of elder figures on American television as well as recurring stereotypes, many still relevant today. Additionally the book’s authors pay particular attention to the

¹³ Richard H. Davis and James A. Davis, eds. *TV's Image of the Elderly: A Practical Guide for Change* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985).

appearance of elder figures on programming aimed at children and adolescents and survey viewers from these age groups on their conception of and feelings toward the aged. The authors argue that the presence of “negative” portrayals of elder figures, as well as the notable absence of elder figures in “normal” or “positive” situations correlates to negative and fearful attitudes in children toward older adults.

While my interests are not in determining negative vs. positive portrayals, prescribing programming solutions, or arguing for direct correlation between representation and public sentiments, *TV's Image of the Elderly* does support my secondary contention that a history of consistent elder kitsch representations has likely played some part in widening generational gaps and working to further alienate elder people from popular culture and society at large. Additionally, this book does make a very brief reference, in a survey of elder representation in television commercials, to the employment of elders as “exotics” to comically promote products to (presumably) younger viewers. Unfortunately, such representations are merely mentioned and not further explored. I draw on this notion of elder kitsch representing elders as “exotics” as part of the dehumanizing/objectifying process of turning aging faces and bodies into insta-jokes for amusement.

Two television history books that have been crucial to situating the television portions of this project are Susan Murray's *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom* (2005) and Christine Becker's *It's the Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (2008). Murray's *Hitch Your Antenna* operates largely as a joint study of stardom and the television industry during

television's formative years, from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s.¹⁴ Murray argues that stardom, particularly that of entertainers in the variety show format, was integral to the development of television as we would come to know and understand it through the "classical network" era. She further argues that television stardom and the manufacturing of its stars was quite different from that of Hollywood, being more intertextual, as well as more deeply and directly integrated into the new consumerist modes of the postwar era. The third part of Murray's argument is that comedy is also a central generic space where much of this negotiation of stardom and industry takes place.

In *It's the Pictures That Got Small*, Christine Becker looks at the effect of television on the Hollywood star system in the 1950s through case studies of several film stars' transition to working on the small screen.¹⁵ Through extensive archival work, Becker composes a history of how certain types of stars, such as character actors and smaller stars like Adolph Menjou and Lucille Ball, made the transition to working in television early on, their presence helping to define the programming. She argues that television's unique relationship with its viewers (entering the home, for instance) led to a new kind of stardom based on notions of authenticity and approachability.

In each of these books, Murray and Becker construct a history of early television told, in part, through analysis of postwar stardom. They employ stardom (and various case studies) to examine the meaning such figures were given by the media of their time. Through this, Murray and Becker create a picture of a culture and its media industries

¹⁴ Susan Murray. *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

¹⁵ Christine Becker. *It's the Picture That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

experiencing a period of redefinition. Additionally important is that each author also addresses, and significantly investigates, multiple media forms; for Murray television and radio, for Becker television and film, and print media for both. This not only adds a richness to their arguments, but reveals how interconnected the respective histories of these industries are and how important it is to not consider each in a vacuum when analyzing cultural history. In this sense, my project continues this line of thinking by considering film and television jointly, while touching, to a lesser extent, on radio, theater and print in order to analyze how the phenomenon of elder kitsch was informed by and amplified across multiple media platforms. The books by Murray and Becker provide a useful model of how to discuss culture through stardom, media texts, and industrial history, showing a postwar America in transition, as previous living and working patterns changed and new roles defined by gender, class, and (presumably) age and generation emerged. While both books mention older stars as having had a notable place in television of the period, they are not explored further, and the third chapter of my project is an attempt to do just that. Additionally, genre plays an important role for both of these authors, particularly in relation to their star case studies. While class, gender, and ethnicity are considered extensively within the context of genre, I believe that age and how it is represented within the generic context of comedy is equally important.

Two other television books covering this period speak greatly to the methodological tradition that I would like to continue. One of the most popular television books about the postwar years, Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992), is a work to which my project is certainly

indebted¹⁶ Looking at a variety of media products (most specifically, women's magazines) from the period, Spiegel produces a cultural history of television's place in family life in the decade following the end of World War II. She documents the movement of family amusements and entertainment from public spaces to the private space of the home and how, for the postwar family, television came to be a crucial part of domestic existence. She constructs an historical overview (demographic, economic, political) and then situates her primary source material within that context. In so doing, she recreates a discourse that reveals a culture negotiating a number of social changes and a media that not only reflects this but also informs it. Spiegel's book is a fascinating model of how to consider issues of culture in a historical sense using various types of media to support one's arguments. She is always cautious to couch her observations and interpretations of advertisements, programs, and magazine articles as elements of particular discourses rather than singularly representative yet she shows how individual ephemera can be woven together and used as supporting evidence for broader arguments.

Michael Kackman's *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (1992) also looks at television and American culture during the postwar years (though continuing past the fifties into the next decade) but, in contrast to Spiegel, places the texts of individual television programs front and center. Kackman begins his book speaking to the social history tradition to which his study is indebted, naming sources like Elaine Tyler May, Lary May, and Alan Nadel. He also, however, considers his book a Ginzbergian micro-history, in which he takes a micro-historical approach to examining the

¹⁶ Lynn Spiegel. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

relationship between media texts and their cultural context. Kackman looks at a collection of spy programs popular on US television during the cold war to explore “not just the normative impulse within these programs, but also the movement across the boundaries of acceptable citizenship that continually redefined American national identity during the Cold War.”¹⁷ Throughout, he presents a micro-history of a particular television genre over the course of fifteen years that uses textual analysis in combination with empirical research of extra-filmic material to convincingly illustrate cultural change in dialogue with stylistic change. To me this work demonstrates a means for analyzing style and form without placing either in a vacuum and understanding texts as historically and culturally specific without drawing over-simplified one-to-one correlations.

Both Spigel’s and Kackman’s books work as socio-cultural histories in addition to being media histories, and my project seeks to emulate this to an extent. Though they take on quite different subjects—television and the domestic sphere, spy programs and patriotism—they manage to say much about postwar American culture, transcending the source material on which they focus. While Spigel’s work is important for moving the history of television beyond just teleological narratives of industrial advancements, she reveals how the embrace of television in the home was due to changes to families themselves and their home lives in the postwar years as much as it was about network expansion or FCC hearings. Kackman similarly connects the personal to the larger narratives of postwar history. While there have been a number of books about Cold War politics in America during the 1950s and 1960s, Kackman uses the Cold War-inspired

¹⁷ Michael Kackman. *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xxiv.

interest in spy programs to examine how such programming negotiated more personal issues, such as the domesticated masculinity of the suburban father, or the integration of primetime television through an “accessible” black figure like Bill Cosby. In this sense, I envision my project exploring similar territory in connecting larger historical narratives (the implementation of Social Security, migration to the suburbs, the rise of the Baby Boomer generation) with the personal (aging, intergenerational conflict, the changing American family) through a body of media texts. My project extends their scholarship, not only by bringing in the under-discussed topic of age but also by pulling together a body of texts that have not really been examined within postwar historical studies. Works like those of Spigel and Kackman were extremely influential in the structure of this project and its methodology.

Methodology

My project attempts to explain one single phenomenon—how the enduring comedic trope of elder kitsch came to be—but my method for historicizing and theorizing this trope relies on an understanding and analysis of a much broader historical, cultural and political context. My project asks two central questions: “Where did the trope of elder kitsch in our media come from?” and “What can understanding the development of this trope teach us about our culture during this period?” With these two questions answered, we can then begin to understand why elder kitsch has such enduring appeal in our contemporary culture.

My approach involves an attention to large-scale social change with a focus on micro-analyses of individual case studies. On the macro level, I am looking at the creation of “old age” as a formalized and institutionalized cultural category during the postwar years. This cultural category reveals itself at the levels of the individual family, public policy, and media representation. As Andrew Blaikie writes, “In explaining the contemporary popular culture around ageing, it seems logical that an approach which can embrace both large-scale transformations in social policy and micro-level shifts in commonsense understandings might be most plausible.”¹⁸ With this in mind, my project owes a debt to the type of approach taken by Michel Foucault in his work on categories such as madness and sexuality or institutions like the prison or the clinic where analysis of macro-level history and ideas are understood largely through instances at the micro level.¹⁹ As this project is both a social history and a media history, I am primarily interested in how this new cultural category of “old age” and the new social formations that emerged are represented through media such as film and television and how these representations reinforced and shaped the social. My project argues that at the moment when “old age” was becoming a distinctly different cultural category during the postwar era, this shift was often negotiated through early formations of the comedic trope I call “elder kitsch.”

¹⁸ Andrew Blaikie. *Aging and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20.

¹⁹ See Michel Foucault. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988); *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990); *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

Throughout this project, I have also chosen subject matter with a somewhat fluid conception of what constitutes “the aging.” While I do examine texts, particularly in the first, second, and fourth chapters, that feature characters explicitly marked as “elderly,” I also include texts, particularly in the films examined in chapter two and the early portions of chapter four, that deal with characters who might not be considered “elderly” but are clearly demarcated as elder figures to the other adults around them (a terminological distinction further clarified below). These depictions include characters struggling with the changing social roles brought on by late middle-age and, by implication, encroaching old age. These depictions help to fill out a larger picture of generational tension and conflict surrounding the prospect of old age during this period that very much informs my specific argument about the development of elder kitsch as a cultural trope.

My project additionally owes a debt to the Carlo Ginzburg model of the micro-history. Though I acknowledge that elder kitsch is part of the discursive changes surrounding old age in American culture of the period, and take the Foucauldian approach in arguing for this understanding, my project will also perform a micro-history of comedic visual representations of elder figures during the postwar years. In this way I believe we can understand the phenomenon not just in the broad terms of genre trend or discursive formation, but through close analysis of the surviving materials that depict such representation. Through the case studies as well, I aim to understand some of these broader notions by close examination of the output of a particular director, the late career of one aging star, and the promotion and reception of a handful of key films. While no single star or film can stand in as representative of all stars and films that are part of this

phenomenon, examining their roles within this history can offer a valuable insight into how the larger social changes, representations, and so on effected some on the more individual level.

As visual depiction of the aging body and face is central to my argument about the symbolic significance of elder kitsch, these depictions are primarily found in film and television. My project makes extensive use of these surviving materials. I look at individual films, television episodes, commercials, and related print material and advertising such as popular press magazines, newspapers, and trade journals relevant to the film, television, and advertising industries. Many of the film and television texts that I analyze are absent from scholarly literature, in part, due to their limited or non-existent circulation. I have made extensive use of materials found during a research trip to the UCLA Film and Television Archive and those made available through the University of Michigan's partnership with The Paley Center. These archives have provided valuable opportunities to view forgotten film and television texts. Similarly, I have made use of archival materials at the University of Iowa and Wesleyan University through research trips in 2009 and 2010, where I analyzed materials originally collected via interviews conducted with Buster Keaton's colleagues and family members, and examined Frank Capra's professional correspondence related to his films of the period in question.

Of course, these texts and archival materials are placed within a wider economic, social, and political context through the guidance of sociological studies and scholarly histories of this period, strengthening this project's interdisciplinary position. This project draws upon contemporary works of the period such as Leo Handel's *Hollywood Looks at*

its Audience (1950)²⁰ and Gilbert Seldes' *The Great Audience* (1951)²¹, as well as a number of sociological works from the time to aid in understanding how the issues I examine were being discussed and thought about by the scholars and critics of their era. Such research has revealed cultural critics, industry professionals, and scholars taking part in thoughtful and informative discussions of many topics covered within my project and I include them to not only enrich my portrait of the period but to inform my arguments, mitigating the chance of painting a previous historical period solely from a contemporary and removed viewpoint.

Retrospective studies, such as Andrew Achenbaum's *Shades of Gray: Old Age, American Values and Federal Policies Since 1920* (1983)²² and Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (1988)²³ have also been enormously informative in my comprehension of the larger social and historical changes (Social Security implementation, suburban migration, economic shifts). Achenbaum demonstrates the crucial relationship between legislation, social welfare movements, and economic changes to cultural attitude and social experience. His work on federal policy and old age in twentieth century America is foundational to my comprehension of the topic, leading me in the direction of a number of other related works. May's book as well has been extremely influential on my conception of postwar American culture and social

²⁰ Leo Handel. *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950).

²¹ Gilbert Seldes. *The Great Audience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1951).

²² Achenbaum, W. Andrew. *Shades of Grey: Old Age, American Values, and Federal Policy Since 1920* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983).

²³ Elaine Taylor May. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

life. Her methodology is also very much a model for this project. Her skillful integration of statistical information, period studies, popular press materials, media depictions and personal accounts provides a comprehensive foundation for her arguments, as well as a compelling historical narrative. It is a model I returned to often in my production of this project. The balance between the individual historical artifact, the individual personal account and the larger socio-historical narrative demonstrates in a very practical way some of the balance I sought to achieve in my own method.

A Note on Terminology

The choice of language in a study about representations of aging has been a special challenge as I have pursued this project. The term “aging” is one that is often overly vague for a given situation. After all, we are every one of us “aging” at any given moment, leaving references to aging open to interpretation in terms of exact meaning. To describe “the aging” as a group has a bit more specificity, given the understanding that the people included in such a group are, to some extent, associated with the experience of moving beyond mere adulthood, into old age. As so, I have used references to “the aging” periodically throughout this work to connote a larger group of people for whom this is the case.

In considering the language used when discussing particular representations or stars in this study, I have also tried to choose my terminology with care. Old age is a variable category for the subjects of this study and often situational. For example, comedians George Burns and Buster Keaton are both discussed within this study. These

comedians were born within a year of each other, making them chronologically very similar in age and generation. In the context of the 1950s television that I analyze in Chapter 3, however, the characters that they play read as being of different age groups. On *The Burns and Allen Show*, George Burns is presented as a man of middle age, of no generational difference from the other adults with which he interacts. Aging is not shown to have any particular association with these people; they (and Burns) are average adults. In his many guest star appearances of the same period, however, Buster Keaton is consistently presented as an “old man” character, generationally different from the other adults with whom he appears. It is only later, during the 1970s, that George Burns’s characters begin to be presented in the same fashion. In this and many cases studied throughout this project, chronological age has much less bearing than contextual or situational age.

As such, I have attempted to choose language that reflects this state of being part of “the aging” that is not necessarily tied to hard and fast chronological guidelines. Referring to the “aged” and the “elderly” has connotations of the obviously very old, which is not often the case of the characters and stars this project examines. To refer to someone as “old” has a pejorative connotation that I have wished to avoid and, again, implies that someone is of extreme age, which is not always the case in this project. Though at times in this study I do refer to characters as an “old man” or “old lady,” this is intended to refer only to the stereotypical cultural representation such characterizations represent.

For the purpose of this project, I have chosen in the majority of instances to use the term “elder.” An “elder” is someone clearly positioned, whether through stated relationship (mother, grandfather) or implication, to be of an older generation than other adult characters in a given film. A rule of thumb that I have adhered to is that if a character is shown or implied to be old enough to have adult children and grandchildren, then they can be classified as an “elder” figure. This is perhaps not a perfect solution for the problem of terminology in this project, but it is the term I feel best suits the needs of this study and best maintains consistency in meaning from usage to usage.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of this dissertation, “I Love the Old Folks at Home: Representations of Elders in Hollywood From 1936-1946,” aims foremost to establish the history prior to the postwar era on which my project is focused. The timeline begins with the passage of the Social Security acts in the 1930s, considering how the broader cultural place of America’s elders was radically changed by the implementation and passage of this significant legislation. I put particular focus on the years of the Great Depression, for what happened during this period laid much of the groundwork for what occurred during the postwar years, while simultaneously standing in stark contrast to them.

In conjunction with this larger history, I include an overview of elder representations in American film comedy in the 1930s, as well as a case study of comedic portrayals of elder figures in the films of Frank Capra. Capra’s films were some of the most popular pictures of the era and also feature numerous elder figures and aged actors

within them, a rarity. This case study reveals a number of films in dialogue with the culture of their times, particularly concerns about the place of the aging within American society. The popularity of these films, gauged through box office, critical acclaim, and fan mail indicates that the style of representation in Capra's films resonated with many Americans during this period. The distinct change in response to Capra's films during the war years and immediately after (specifically, *Arsenic and Old Lace* in 1944 and *It's a Wonderful Life* in 1946) makes an interesting case for changing sensibilities of the public following the end of the Depression. This opens the door to the types of representation during the late 1940s and onward which the remaining chapters discuss. Though Capra is the primary case study in this chapter, I also analyze his films in relation to others, some representations from the silent era and the 1930s, but particularly Leo McCarey's seminal *Make Way for Tomorrow* (1937). Ultimately, this chapter poses one of this project's fundamental questions: How did our most popular comedic representations of elders evolve, in the space of less than twenty years, from the clever and wise figures of Capra's Depression Era comedies to the slapstick and dirty jokes of elder kitsch?

The second chapter, "Adult Films for the Lost Audience of Postwar America," begins my consideration of elder representation in the postwar years by looking at cultural discourse about generational conflict and film attendance. Specifically, I address the postwar "lost audience" that troubled the film industry in the late 1940s and 1950s. While much has been written about the industry's focus on the group perceived as a growing majority of their remaining audience—the youth market—this chapter argues that there also were concentrated and deliberate attempts to appeal to a specific older

population of this lost audience which have yet to be considered. This chapter examines this topic from a production/promotion standpoint (considering specific films and their publicity), an exhibition standpoint (considering new strategies intended to appeal to this audience), and a reception standpoint (based on reviews and box office). In particular, I examine the films *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950).

The analysis in this chapter reveals an entertainment industry moving away from wartime strategies of mainstream audience appeal and toward niche demographics, influenced in large part by shifts in the advertising industry, internal research commissions, as well as significant shifts in Americans' social environments. This discourse suggests that a specific aging public was starting to feel that their entertainment needs were unmet by Hollywood as critics, academics, and people within the industry were warning against the "juvenilization" of American film. All of this coincides with the beginning of the studio system breakdown and the rise of the independent producer, both of which play a significant role in weakening the production code. This moment speaks to a larger social fracturing along generational lines. The young and the aging no longer are viewed (as well as, seemingly, view themselves) as part of the same mainstream popular culture, but instead ever more apart socially as well as spatially.

The third chapter, "Blue Hair and the Blue Glow: The Older Star and Early Television," also considers the generational divide within the Hollywood industry, this time examining the difference between older actors and younger stars, and television's use of older stars to court television buyers who remembered them. Once these older stars

have helped to establish a healthy viewing public for Hollywood, however, they are shuffled out of the way to make room for new, youth-centric stars and programming formats. This chapter uses as a case study Buster Keaton's late-in-life resurgence, some twenty-five years after his career peaked as a popular comic star in silent era Hollywood, to serve as a lens with which to examine the space that television provided for Hollywood's first generation of stars to reach old age. This occurs at a unique moment in which the film and television industries were undergoing a major process of redefinition and definition, respectively. During this same moment, the American public, elders in particular, was also experiencing a period of flux, undergoing demographic, geographic and economic changes spurred on by the end of World War II and the implementation of major government policies like the GI Bill and Social Security.

Within this chapter I examine the space that television of the late 1940s and 1950s provided for aging stars such as Keaton, Gloria Swanson, and ZaSu Pitts to perform and aging audience members to be entertained as well as the role that genre, particularly comedy, played in providing this space. My analysis explores why so many older stars found a new featured performance space in mainstream television programming during this period and then were subsequently shuffled out of these starring roles. Finally, it asks how these generic confines helped to create the trope of "elder kitsch" as a particular comedic "type," reinforced over the decades.

The fourth chapter, "Agesploitation: Genre and the Aging Body," addresses the kind of roles available to older stars in the postwar years. For those who could not fit into the "silver fox" role of a Cary Grant or James Stewart, (a cultural anomaly to be

discussed briefly), the choice of available work often left melodrama, horror, or comedy, with camp developing as an increasingly popular style overlaying them all. In this chapter, I look at the emergence of the teenager and the teenage audience/demographic in parallel with the ousting of grandparents and other elders from the immediate family and main social arena as a context for the generic space often allotted to elders during this period. I also look at different generic case studies of melodramas (such as Douglas Sirk's women's weepies), horror pictures (Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) and *Hush, Hush, Sweet Charlotte* in 1964), broad comedies (the *Beach Party* films) and the common characteristics among them. In doing so, this chapter considers theoretical material related to these genres and the relationship between the audiences and the visual representations that these films present. Such films were created for and marketed to age-stratified audiences in ways that celebrated and valorized youth while pushing the elderly into exploitative territories such as horror and camp, contributing to the formation of the elder kitsch trope that becomes so familiar in the decades following.

This chapter takes a more overtly theoretical approach in its analysis of representation within these generic contexts. It draws on the work in particular of scholar Linda Williams in considering the physical spectatorial experience associated with these genres as a means to understand the context within which many of these elder roles were placed. Comedy, horror, and melodrama all revolve around extreme representations and extreme emotions. I argue that there is a connection between the visual extreme of the aging body/face and the physical release provided to audiences by these "body" genres. I

also use the theories of Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin to explore how comedy (particularly the rise of camp aesthetics in comedy during this period) is a through-line linking all of these genres and the “agesploitation” that becomes a common trope within them. In doing so, I argue that genre, and comedy in particular, played a key role in the change of elder representation during the postwar years. Over the course of twenty years, American culture had moved from one which celebrated “graybeards” as a source of experience and wisdom to one in which “Trust no one over thirty” could become a popular motto. Eventually within this period, through the variety of factors laid out in the previous pages, the only way to sell elders within an increasingly youth-focused media culture was to bring them back to be appreciated in a kitschy, ironic fashion. Despite the arguably dehumanizing effect of such representation, from the mid-50s onward elder kitsch has proven to be a steady seller with the youth market.

The concluding epilogue sums up what this project has covered and the ways in which it has answered the research questions posed during the introduction. It recaps briefly the individual chapters and case studies, underscoring how they work together to illuminate my conception of elder kitsch and its place within our culture historically. This epilogue underscores the ways in which this historical/cultural moment of the early postwar years lays the groundwork for the more contemporary and better known instances of elder kitsch that have become familiar to the point of near ubiquity. I briefly point to important elder kitsch touchstones such as *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1972), George Burns’s career of the 1970s and 1980s, the *Cocoon* films, various ad campaigns as well as, of course, the American public’s recent infatuation with Betty

White. Lastly, the epilogue discusses the larger implications of recognizing elder kitsch and what may come following my historical examination. It includes questions for further inquiry, discussion, and future study.

Pre-History: An Overview of Old Age in American Culture to the 1930s

To understand the changing representations of elder figures that this project argues came about due to a number of factors in America's postwar years, we must first look to what came before. In the following section, I synthesize the literature about how elder figures have historically been conceived within American society and correspondingly represented in its media, with particular emphasis on the early twentieth century. Unsurprisingly, such cultural conceptions and representations have been dynamic, evolving in accordance with the changing circumstances, experiences, technologies, and spiritual beliefs of the American people.

Attempts by scholars to reconstruct this history have also differed in approach and, in some cases, interpretation of the same available material.²⁴ For instance, if we look back to America's earliest history, we can view, as historian David Hackett Fisher argues in *Growing Old in America*, a society that is essentially a gerontocracy.²⁵ While there is debate about the extent and longevity of this gerontocracy in colonial America, there is agreement that elders certainly held a social and economic position of not

²⁴ For a detailed overview of how different historians have argued for the interpretation of this history, see Carole Haber and Brian Gratton. *Old Age and the Search for Security: An American Social History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

²⁵ David Hackett Fisher. *Growing Old in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

insignificant power. As Haber and Gratton summarize in *Old Age and the Search for Security*, “Especially in the seventeenth century, community values protected the elderly; they were considered religious symbols of God’s benevolence and the possessors of essential wisdom. Although hardly established as a ‘golden age’ for the elderly, early colonial society did recognize that great age often brought valued assets and indispensable knowledge.”²⁶

The traditions of land ownership and inheritance, carried over from Great Britain to the colonies, certainly contributed to this. In most cases, property was handed down generationally, positioning the oldest members of the households with the power of legal ownership. Under fear of disownment and disinheritance, elders within the family were presumably accorded respect and deference through these circumstances. Aside from land ownership, the agrarian and pre-industrial economy of the colonial period trades were often handed down from an elder relation or married into, involving one moving into a home or business under the authority of an older generation. Even apprenticeship, another traditional means for embarking on a trade involves an explicit deference to the wise and more experienced, usually older, tradesman. As Hackett has pointed out, this cultural respect for elders and the power associated with their longstanding and perseverance, was reflected in popular dress of the period—powdered wigs and coats which mimicked stooped shoulders—with ambitious younger generations “wearing” old age to signify power, respectability, and accomplishment.

²⁶ Haber and Gratton (1994), 7.

As scholars from many fields have pointed out, advanced old age was relatively rare prior to the late 19th century, usually reserved for those with a somewhat comfortable lifestyle, affording them decent living conditions, less manual toil, and access to the health care of the day that was available. Additionally, death was such a common occurrence in infancy, childhood, and throughout all stages of adulthood that it did not have the exclusive association with old age that it has come to have more recently. As such, old age and its related visual characteristics were often associated with a certain level of perseverance and prosperity. Commissioned portraits and religious imagery of the period reflect this.

Of course, some unflattering depictions and stereotypes of old age, especially of older women, can be seen during the colonial period and in Europe for centuries before that. Old hags, witches, old maids and even the somewhat more respectful term of “spinster” have long carried a derisive connotation and their own negative associations. In the biological economy of society, a woman has traditionally been valued based on her youthful beauty and, theoretically related though not always, fecundity; a woman who can display neither of these traits had little social currency. Coupled with land and property ownership laws which favored men and male heirs, an unmarried or childless aging woman ranked quite low in early American society, bearing the brunt of derisive visualizations and stereotypes long before elder kitsch would demean the aged male as well, though such depictions of these women were more fearful than funny.

It is in the nineteenth century, most scholars agree, that major changes began to occur in the social status of American elders, although they differ in where they place

such changes within the century. One branch argues that it was the post-revolutionary/early republic's emphasis on the United States as a youthful nation that helped to usher out the veritable gerontocracy of the eighteenth century. Changes in property laws and the expansion of the country during these years led to a gradual cultural shift in which, as Haber and Gratton put it, "society moved inexorably toward gerontophobia."²⁷ Other scholars, notably historian W. Andrew Achenbaum, place the real turning point for American elders in the years following the Civil War. Additionally, scientific and medical advancements during this period both lowered the mortality rates among the young and increased the expected lifespan of the old, more exclusively associating death with old age than in generations prior. Between the end of the Civil War and the early twentieth century, the number of Americans who reached the age of sixty-five had jumped by 59%.²⁸ At the same time, the American economy continued to move further away from agriculture and manual production—fields where experience and developed skills were invaluable—and toward technological and machine-based industry, fields where speed and adaptability were far more desirable traits. Set ages of retirement were often enforced, formally or informally.

Age began to lose its connotations of wisdom and good fortune in this increasingly industrialized and urbanized population. Gradually it became replaced by a medicalized view, categorizing old age as a separate stage of life, one of physical and mental deterioration, akin to a disease and requiring professional, scientific, and even institutional attention. Reformers and social movements that argued for pensions and

²⁷ Haber and Gratton (1994), 5.

²⁸ Achenbaum (1983), 14.

state support of the elderly reinforced this view. As the swelling numbers of elders occupying workhouses, alms houses, and rest homes led to the establishment of social security schemes in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, American reformers called for similar bureaucratic solutions. Arguing that the structural poverty of elders could only be alleviated by institutional and governmental solutions, such reformers contributed to a public conception of old age—not unlike childhood, itself being codified by reform movements and scientists of the period as a distinct physical and psychological life stage—as a time of dependence.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, elder Americans were presented in social discourse as a problematic group quite different from “regular” adults.

Achenbaum writes:

People increasingly characterized old age as a “social problem.” By the end of World War I if not before, Americans no longer ascribed to the elderly duties and prerogatives that once had permitted them to fulfill socially useful and respectable functions. And while many of the individual woes of growing old had long been spoken of, commentators in the early decades of this century underscored the presumably “scientific” basis for viewing later life as a period of pathological deterioration, eccentric behavior, and painful irrelevance.²⁹

Questions regarding the value and burden of elders to their community are frequently raised in writings of these years, indicating attempts to culturally negotiate a transitional social period.

Traditionally, citizens had worked late into life, usually until physical disabilities or death interfered with this. Once no longer able to work, a prosperous few were able to support themselves off of savings and others, beginning in the 19th century, had the

²⁹ Achenbaum (1983), 14-15.

benefit of small retiree or widow pensions provided in a handful of professions. For the vast majority of the aged, however, family was the default means of support, with multi-generational households very much the norm. Those who reached old age without the benefits of significant savings, a pension, or family, a population which was swelling, had little choice but to turn to the charity of the community at large. As Abraham Epstein noted in a sociological study from 1922, “Most of these aged folk [...] are taken care of by their children or relatives. Indeed, this is given by the Pennsylvania Commission as the chief difference between those who remain ‘non-dependent’ and those who must seek the poorhouse as their sheltering place.”³⁰

Prior to the twentieth century, the burden of caring for the elderly without families had fallen upon privately supported charities, churches and, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, government-funded poor-houses. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, in part due to the increase in the elderly population which overwhelmed these earlier institutions, communities began to take on a greater role. Social clubs were formed, like The Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, to, in part or in full, take on the task of caring for elders. There were also Poor Boards and Community Chests established in towns and cities across America, taking in donations from the community to be distributed in payments or through care to its less fortunate members, an example of

³⁰ Abraham Epstein. *Facing Old Age: A Study of Old Age Dependency in the United States and Old Age Pensions* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922), 60.

which was recorded as an accepted social occurrence in the famous Middletown cultural study of Muncie, Indiana published in 1929.³¹

During the 1920s, many state governments implemented pension schemes in an attempt to alleviate the growing strain on charity organizations. The miniscule pension amounts offered, however (which varied greatly from state to state) were seldom enough to keep the aged out of poverty. Such pensions were also often unreliably paid out and the schemes tended to collapse or become overly restricted due to poor or even nonexistent funding. In this period, a number of movements were organized, advocating for a federal scheme. Though such organizations (including the groups that came to be known as The Townsend Movement and the American Association for Old Age Security) grew in membership, their cause did not garner serious attention from the rest of America and the federal government until the country found itself in the midst of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression, and passage of Social Security that came with it, represents the beginning of a cultural turning point that is of central interest to this study. In one sense, this period surrounding the passage of Social Security can be seen as a high point of visibility in terms of representation of elders onscreen in Hollywood. Elders are very much on the minds of the public and, as well, very much onscreen, particularly in comparison to their more incidental appearances in earlier periods of American cinema. In another sense, the passage of Social Security and its various stages of implementation

³¹ See the chapter “Caring for the Unable” in Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell. *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 458-470.

over the next decade mark a major evolution in how American culture would come to conceive of “old age” as a life stage, and elders as a distinct and problematic group within twentieth century society. It is at this moment that my analysis begins.

Chapter 1

I Love the Old Folks at Home: Elder Representation in Hollywood from 1936-1946

“We are indebted to you, beyond words, for the excellent choice and arrangements of our amusements. While others take us back to obsoleted ideas of life, your pictures tend to advance our consciousness or cause us to stop to think a moment about our directions.”
--Fan letter to Frank Capra, November 5th, 1938³²

In this first chapter, I begin my history of elder representation in mid-20th century Hollywood, with particular emphasis on its comedies. This chapter also serves to supply much of the historical groundwork, in terms of political and social history, upon which the arguments of the following chapters are based. The period surrounding the passage and implementation of Social Security marks a turning point in America when its elders became formally demarcated as a separate class of citizen, requiring large-scale governmental assistance, financed by its younger generations. In addition to the social history, the main focus of this chapter involves a detailed examination of the representation of elders in some of the most popular films of this period, providing a useful window into the developing social conceptions that become steadily more defined in the following decades. Special attention is paid to the films of Frank Capra, a prominent figure to moviegoers of the period whose films often dominated the box office.

³² Letter from J.J. Murin of Arnold, PA, dated November 5, 1938. Part of the Frank Capra Collection of Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT. Located in Box 4, Folder: “*You Can’t Take It With You* Correspondence, 1938 October 21-November 15.”

The choice of Capra's films as a place to examine representational issues of elders is not arbitrary. In part, this decision is due to the period on which this essay will focus—Capra's films were at the height of their popularity at this time, as was Capra himself, a highly visible and bankable "brand name." Capra's name above the title of his pictures, as it was from 1936 onward, served as a promise to audiences that certain distinctive and recognizable elements would be present from film to film. This idea of the "Capraesque" film, influenced in no small part by the filmmaker's affable, "every man" public persona, appears to have led many audience members to engage on a surprisingly personal level with the characters in his films, as evidenced by Capra's substantial collection of fan mail, referenced throughout this chapter. This level of identification with the portrayals in Capra's films, as well as the films' generally warm and humanistic quality, so different from the style of comedy examined toward the end of this project, makes Capra's films an intriguing case study.

By examining Capra's films, their representations and reception, on a detailed, micro level, my aim is to paint a picture of the evolving cultural conceptions of elders in America more broadly. The examples considered in this chapter, whether they are the individual products of a single filmmaker, or the individual responses of letter writers and critics, cannot encompass the entirety of cultural attitudes toward the elderly within this period, but I believe that they do document some of the most prominent representations within the culture during this time. That these representations are so strikingly different from those in the postwar years, serves to demonstrate how very much cultural

representations and conceptions of elders were affected by this tumultuous and important period.

The last part of this chapter will look at the content and reception of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), a film that was received with less enthusiasm than Capra had been accustomed to and came to mark a turning point, after which the star director would never again hold the same level of box office appeal and cultural cache. I argue that the change in reception toward this film, which bears so many of the marks of a “Capra Film” can be seen as illustrative of a public shift away from the interests and values regarding the individual’s responsibility to and role within the community that Capra had connected with so successfully in the previous decade, many of them so pertinent to the discourse surrounding elders in American society.

Elder Representation During the Great Depression

Of the many demographic groups affected profoundly by the Depression, older Americans were among those hardest hit. Along with impoverished children, the plight of elders left destitute was one of the most frequently depicted in the media. Examples of this can be seen not only in photographs and newsreels, but in written descriptions as well. Throughout the 1930s, a common sight in major newspapers was a section devoted to “the neediest among us.” These sections comprised short descriptions of individuals or families (usually identified by first names or initials only), the hardships they had endured, the exact amount of money that could help each get back on their feet, and the specific charity where such funds could be directed. Widows and elders are common

subjects. One profile, published in *The New York Times* on January 1, 1933, describes Mrs. P, aka “Case 395.” Mrs. P, according to the article, had spent the last seventeen years toiling at cooking and cleaning positions in order to support her invalid husband. The year prior, things had begun to look up as Mrs. P’s husband had improved enough to the point that doctors suggested he might be capable of walking again. “And then,” the article reads:

At the age of 53, she broke down; high blood pressure forced her to give up her toil. Her husband, now 60, is still too crippled to earn a living and probably never will work again. Their savings are now gone and they were hungry until outsiders learned of their distress. Rather than let the neighbors learn that they had no food, Mrs. P would boil an onion for hours to deceive them with its savory odor. But the time came when she had to confess her destitution and ask for help.³³

The case immediately following that of Mrs. P is entitled “Last Days of an Old Mother” and details the story of a 72-year-old doorman who recently dropped dead of a heart attack, leaving his 94-year-old invalid mother and her 60-year-old caretaker daughter without any insurance, pension, or means of support. Such stories undoubtedly appealed to the sympathy of the American public and helped inspire large-scale support for the establishment of some type of federal pension plan. As part of his “New Deal,” President Franklin Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law in 1935.³⁴ Despite heated public and political debate over the specifics of the program (many of the same

³³ “Case 395,” *The New York Times*. January 1, 1933: 2.

³⁴ The Social Security Act (H.R. 7260, Public Law No. 271, 74th Congress), enacted August 14, 1935.

arguments continue nearly unchanged into our current day), Social Security was expanded and went into widespread effect in 1939.³⁵

Despite the Great Depression, the 1930s are often viewed as a golden age for Hollywood cinema, associated with some of the most revered films and stars of the studio era. Though Hollywood was not immune to the effects of the Great Depression and struggled in the early years of the economic crisis, the years between 1934 and the end of World War II represent the peak period of movie-attendance in American history. During this era of regular movie-going, Hollywood cinema can be viewed as a crucial element, along with radio and periodicals, of many Americans' media consumption. Moreover, as Tino Balio writes, "As a central social institution, Hollywood ranked as the third-largest source of news in the country, surpassed only by Washington and New York [...] This fascination with the movies revealed itself not only in the public's preoccupation with the life-styles of the stars, but also in the presumed power of the movies as a socializing force."³⁶ It is this power as a "socializing force" that makes American cinema of the period a particularly interesting subject when considering the change in social position that elder figures underwent during the political battles for, and implementation of, Social Security. If films help to shape not only the fashions and trends of their time, but also reinforce or even present models of "acceptable" behavior and dominant values, then Hollywood is certainly an important place to look when considering how Americans of

³⁵ See United States Social Security Administration historical document chronology: www.ssa.gov/history/1930.html

³⁶ Tino Balio. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2.

the time were being instructed, however intentionally or overtly, to conceptualize their elders.

In films of the 1930s, older actors' roles can generally be grouped into three reoccurring types: saintly mothers, out-of-touch millionaires, and admirable pillars of the community. Such types are informative to examine in order to understand the patterns established for elder roles in the golden age of Hollywood, as well as to view the early seeds of what would become elder kitsch or, perhaps, the representations from which it was a notable diversion. The first of these categories, which Karen Stoddard explores in some depth in her 1983 work, *Saints and Shrews: Women and Aging in American Popular Film* portrays elder women, in this case almost exclusively mothers, as "saints." A well-known representation of this type that Stoddard points to is that played by Beryl Mercer in *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931) as Ma Powers, the saintly, unconditionally loving mother of gangster James Cagney. Such characters, Stoddard argues, are symbols of the goodness and old-fashioned values from which youth such as Cagney have strayed. Such characters are also notably powerless, though theoretically admirable for their saintliness. Stoddard writes, "A close analysis of the character of Ma Powers may well suggest that the power of the pedestal diminished for women whose backgrounds moved them far away from the middle-class, WASPish ideal; Ma, an aging immigrant, could only stand by and watch the disintegration of her family within a culture of which she could never truly be a part."³⁷ While Stoddard attributes this movement away from the middle class to Ma's immigrant status, it can just as easily be

³⁷ Stoddard (1983), 37.

attributed in part to widowed Ma's generational shift from "the middle" to a more vulnerable and dependent elder class. Ma is economically dependent upon her sons but also socially removed from the rapidly changing world (one of crime, corruption and changing morals) to which they endeavor to adapt.

The representation of the saintly parent is not limited to the widowed mother. In *Make Way for Tomorrow* (Leo McCarey, 1937), we see the parents of adult children, husband and wife Barkley (Victor Moore) and Lucy (Beulah Bondi), presented as figures of moral superiority and sympathetic character, as well as victims of their children's behavior and of changing times. While not criminals of the James Cagney standard, the saintly parents' children in *Make Way for Tomorrow* are characterized in nearly as negative a fashion, shown to be selfish and lacking in empathy, materialistic and short-sighted. Based on a popular contemporary novel and stage play, *The Years Are So Long*, the film speaks quite clearly to the public discourse and concerns that would lead to the passage and implementation of the Social Security acts during the 1930s. Barkley and Lucy are left in financial turmoil when Barkley is forced out of a job due to his age. Their home goes into foreclosure and the two are split up, each gone to stay with one of their children's family in different parts of the country. Much of the film dramatizes the couple's attempts to carry on their affectionate relationship through letters and telephone calls while their children complain about the burden of caring for their parents. By the end of the film, Barkley is to be shipped to California to stay with yet another of his children and Lucy is confined to a women's nursing home on the East Coast. It is made clear that, after one comedic and sentimental afternoon spent revisiting the locations of

their honeymoon in New York, the elderly couple do not expect to see each other again. At the end of the film their children too come to this realization and chastise themselves for their selfish behavior, though they seem unwilling or unable to change this outcome now that their decisions have been set in motion, closing the film on a tragic note.

The adaptations of the Edna Ferber short story “Old Man Minick,” produced twice by Warner Brothers in the 1930s, as *The Expert* (Archie Mayo, 1932) and *No Place to Go* (Terry Morse, 1939), tell a similar story of a saintly parent treated poorly by his unlikeable son and daughter-in-law when he comes to live with them. In both films, the old man (played by Charles Chic Sale and Fred Stone, respectively) quickly finds that he is not wanted or appreciated in the home of his son and social-climbing daughter-in-law, making friends instead with an impoverished young orphan boy and friendly old men who inhabit a nearby rest home. Tensions escalate between the old man and his son and daughter-in-law to the point where the old man uses his savings to buy a place at the rest home for himself and the orphan boy, whom he adopts. Unlike the institution awaiting Lucy in *Make Way for Tomorrow*, the rest home in these pictures is presented as a positive place, promising generational camaraderie, but also, unlike Lucy and Barkley, the old man in these films has the financial independence to buy his own happy ending.

A similar divide of generation and values characterizes the second category of elder representation common in 1930s films: out-of-touch millionaires. If Beryl Mercer might be seen as the quintessential saintly mother actress of the period, I would argue that Alice Brady might be the ideal representative of Hollywood’s go-to mindless moneyed matron. We can look to films such as *My Man Godfrey* (Gregory LaCava, 1936) in which

she plays the empty-headed and judgmental matriarch of the wealthy Bullock family or *Mama Steps Out* (George B. Seitz, 1937) in which Brady plays a similar, if more likeable, bored and frivolous matriarch. While the age of Brady's characters may well signify their "out-of-touch-ness" and removal from modern concerns and morals, much as the age and old-world ways of a saintly mother like Ma Powers signifies, this is not exclusively tied to their age. The cruelty in such comedic roles centers around class issues rather than age—only upper-class elders are open to humiliation and scorn, and their upper-class children, such as Mrs. Bullock's snobby daughter played Gail Patrick, are equally buffoonish. Lower-class elder figures, such as Godfrey's older tramp friends, are presented instead as humble and "good."

This association of goodness with powerlessness (economic and otherwise) continues into the third category of popular elder representation: admirable pillars of the community, holding families of all kinds together. Examples of this type of representation can also be seen in *Make Way for Tomorrow*, in the characterization of an elderly German immigrant couple that Barkley befriends. This couple own a general store in the small town where Barkley has been sent to live, and are shown to be equal and enthusiastic partners in the enterprise. The store serves as a hub within the community, in no small part due to the efforts and friendliness of the German couple. It is this couple who draw Barkley out of isolation, giving him reason to leave his child's home, to talk to people outside of his family, to take part in life, despite being separated from the companionship of his wife and the purposefulness of employment. They also take care of Barkley when he falls ill, seeming to do a better job than both the young town doctor and

Barkley's family. The couple also stands in contrast to Barkley and Lucy who, though they have a similarly intimate and affectionate marriage bond, are experiencing the community of their family (and partnership) torn asunder by the actions of their children. A parallel is drawn between the German couple, who have autonomy and purpose in their larger community and who, consequently, *feel* more young, and Barkley and Lucy, lacking in purpose and wholly vulnerable to the whims of younger people.

Such depictions, however, are not limited to dramas or melodramas but can, like the out-of-touch millionaires, be seen frequently in comedies as well. This type of representation takes on its full form in the films of Frank Capra. While Capra's films of the era have their fair share of "saintly mothers," which I will address shortly, they also seem to have very deliberately specialized in the elder as pillar of the community representation. Because this style of representation (and how Capra employs it within his films) is so markedly different from the elder kitsch representation that would develop over the next several decades, Capra's films make an ideal case study in understanding the cultural and filmic "before" of elder kitsch. In the remainder of this chapter I will use Capra as an organizing framework to examine this particular representation and its changing public and critical response over the course of the 1930s and 1940s.

Capra as a Case-Study Pre-War

Capra's films from *The Younger Generation* (1929) onward, contain a number of elder characters in retrospect. Although many can be fitted into the categories of representation previously outlined, at times they also seem to work against these types. In the classic "saintly parents" role, we can look to *The Miracle Woman* (1931), which

features Beryl Mercer playing troubled Barbara Stanwyck's pious and admirable saintly mother. We can also look to *The Younger Generation*, a transitional part-talkie that deals pointedly with the divide between an upwardly mobile first-generation Jewish-American Morris Goldfish (Ricardo Cortez) and his immigrant parents. Morris is an ambitious businessman who is ashamed of the old world ways of his parents. He Americanizes his name to sound less Jewish, disowns his sister out of fear that her recently jailed husband will bring the wrong kind of attention to the family, and disregards his parents' wishes and advice, viewing his own very "American" and modern way of thinking as better. At the climax of the film, Morris becomes embarrassed by his parents' old-fashioned dress and behavior while out with his love interest and her own parents. He berates his parents in Yiddish, unaware that his love interest's father understands the language. His potential father-in-law scolds Morris for speaking to his parents so rudely and forbids his daughter from marrying someone with so little respect for his elders.³⁸

While out-of-touch millionaires turn up as well, in Edward Arnold's highbrow banker character, Anthony Kirby, in *You Can't Take it With You* (1938), and in the wealthy men Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper) consorts with in New York after receiving his unexpected inheritance in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), it is the pillar of

³⁸ *The Younger Generation* appears very much inspired by or, at least, quite similar to *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland, 1927), a very prominent picture at the time for integrating a partial synch-sound "talkie" soundtrack, as well as featuring musical star Al Jolson. *The Jazz Singer* similarly tells the story of a first-generation Jewish-American struggling to integrate into American society, in this case, as a jazz performer, while not angering his jazz-hating, orthodox rabbi father. Unlike the Capra film, however, the sympathy appears to lie much more with Jolson and his supportive, saintly mother, than with his traditional, immigrant father, though Jolson's father does eventually relent by the end of the film.

the community elders who are central to the “Capraesque” portraits of America and its communities. Though the stories in his films almost always center around youthful stars, like Gary Cooper, Barbara Stanwyck, Jean Arthur, James Stewart, or Cary Grant, contemporary reviews consistently commend the work of each film’s entire cast, often noting that no one actor can be singled out from such successful group effort. It is these group casts, so central to Capra films, which feature older actors in a remarkable array of parts. Among those who appeared frequently in Capra pictures, covering a variety of roles are Lionel Barrymore, Edward Arnold, Spring Byington, Beulah Bondi, H.B. Warner, and Samuel S. Hinds. Capra’s rotating cast of elder characters help to furnish the diegetic worlds of his pictures with the sense that his characters exist within a “real” world, populated by a recognizable community, not simply a world constructed for photogenic youth. In these films, characters have held jobs for years, lived in the same houses all their lives and share a history with the people around them. Elder figures are not merely limited to “color” or flat “kindly grandmother” roles but instead have their own pursuits and plots—in some cases, as with *You Can’t Take It With You* and *Arsenic and Old Lace*, they become more central to the story than the supposed hero or heroine.

These characterization of elder figures in Capra pictures allow them to become more than simply “elder figures.” Within a single picture, such as *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, there is a variety of representations of old age—from the dotty and naïve but sweet Faulkner sisters (Margaret McWade and Margaret Seddon), to the clever housekeeper (Emma Dunn) who works for Longfellow Deeds but communicates on an equal level with him and teases him, to the pompous Freud-like Austrian psychiatrist (Gustav von

Seyffertitz) called in to testify regarding Deeds's sanity, who is later called out as a childish doodler, to the judge (H.B. Warner) who insists upon proper courtroom protocol but later is revealed to be sympathetic to the eccentric Deeds, declaring him "the sanest man who ever walked in this courtroom." And this is not to mention the thousands of old men who show up at Deeds's home to apply for the farm plots he has decided to give away. Though they are referred to in the film only as farmers, it seems a notable choice of casting that not one appears to be a day under fifty. These old men are the sympathetic heart of the film, exhibiting humility, pride, and quiet desperation in the face of the Great Depression. They bring out Deeds's altruistic side, inspiring him to give away his millions and they show up to protest on Deeds's behalf at the courthouse when the rest of the public has turned against him. In the second to last scene of the film, Deeds is literally carried away on a sea of cheering, gray-haired men.

The elder vitality displayed in the scene above is not unique to that one instance. Capra's elder characters, unlike those portrayed in many 1930s media images, such as Mrs. P and her invalid husband in "Case 395," are often lively, spirited and active. Stuffy banker Anthony Kirby (Edward Arnold) in *You Can't Take It With You* complains throughout much of the film of his stomach ailments and mentions that he used to wrestle in his youth but brushes off the suggestion that he would be able to demonstrate some of his old moves again. Later, after being seduced by the carefree philosophy of Grandpa Vanderhof (Lionel Barrymore), Kirby dances, plays the harmonica and picks up a younger brute, spins him around and slams him to the ground. This idealized portrait of elder vitality even extends to the realm of non-fictional infirmity. Lionel Barrymore was

troubled enough by arthritis during the making of the film that he is filmed walking on crutches throughout the picture. Within the film, this is explained away not as the result of a physical disorder associated with aging, but as the result of Grandpa Vanderhof having slid down the banister with his granddaughter and broken his leg—fun-loving, youthful indulgence.

The vitality of elders in these films is representative of the vitality of the community, a central part of Capra's diegetic social value system. What is more remarkable than these idealized portraits of happy, healthy elders is that they are not excluded from the community or cordoned off as separate within it. Rather, like the youthful eccentrics and dreamers around them, each elder is no different from anyone else. This ties into the films' historical moment by not only offering a bit of attractive fantasy in place of the sad reality of many elders during the Great Depression, but also offering an appealing, idealized representation of extended family at a time in which economic devastation was making desertion commonplace and forcing many people into shared living situations with relatives or neighbors. An example of this kind of living situation by necessity can be seen in a letter to an advice columnist printed in the *Chicago Tribune* on September 6, 1939. The unnamed correspondent writes:

We have been living with my widowed mother ever since we returned from our honeymoon [...] Recently, my sister, who is several years my senior, lost her husband and she is coming home to mother. That will make four grownups under one roof. [...] My husband now wants to purchase a six or seven room home under the government plan. Of course, we couldn't afford to do this ourselves, as the initial payment would take most of our savings and we then couldn't furnish it for some time. He feels that, with my mother and sister sharing the cost of the home, that is

one half, we could purchase one. I am against starting life off with four grown-ups in the family. It can't work out to everyone's interest.³⁹

The columnist, Doris Blake, advises the writer to “Keep all in-laws out; as permanent residents, that is.”⁴⁰ This exchange illustrates the general dislike of such situations but, tellingly, the columnist does not offer any solution to the economic quandary at the center of the discussion. Until that can be solved, the letter writer appears a bit stuck.

Capra's films represent not only extended families of relations, as in *You Can't Take It With You* or *Arsenic and Old Lace*, but also de facto extended families among groups of characters in shared workplaces, neighborhoods and residences. Communities become *like* family, with all the attendant responsibilities of the individual to the group. This is a crucial ideal in the context of the 1930s, appealing in the way that it counters mass disillusion and strife with the message that Americans can make things better at least locally, if not nationally, by helping each other out and treating other people as if they were family. This is greatly in evidence in the “neediest among us” features mentioned earlier in this chapter. In such presentations, overwhelming problems become reduced to the stories of individual people, arousing sympathy, often through family descriptors, like “widowed mother” or “fatherless child.” Much the same is witnessed in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* when Deeds is drawn in by the face of one destitute farmer and is inspired to give his millions away to help the other individual people who are hurting.

The importance of the individual's membership in and responsibility to his community is seen again and again in Capra's films, as in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

³⁹ Doris Blake. “Advice to Bride: Keep In-Laws Out,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 6, 1939, 18.

⁴⁰ Blake, (1939), 18.

(1939) when Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) filibusters himself to collapse in order to save the land intended for a scouts' camp, or, in *Meet John Doe*, when the public demonstration of desperation by John Doe (Gary Cooper) inspires millions of ordinary citizens around the country to form John Doe Clubs which help out the needy in their communities without any government intervention or support. One of the most blatant expressions of this sentiment comes when Doe gives a rousing radio address, inspired, it should be stressed, by Ann Mitchell's (Barbara Stanwyck) tales of her "old man." On national radio, he declares:

We've all got to get in there and pitch. We can't win the old ballgame unless we have teamwork. And that's where every John Doe comes in. It's up to him to get together with his teammates. And your teammate, my friend, is the guy next door to you. Your neighbor -- he's a terribly important guy that guy next door. You're gonna need him and he's gonna need you, so look him up. If he's sick, call on him. If he's hungry, feed him. If he's out of a job, find him one. [...] Yes sir, my friends, the meek can only inherit the earth when the John Does start lovin' their neighbors. You better start right now. Don't wait till the game is called on account of darkness. Wake up, John Doe. You're the hope of the world.

Such inspirational, second-person address is echoed in advertising for Capra's films, which extend the communal sensibility beyond the screen and into the audience. Ads for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, which feature portraits of each of twelve cast members (not just the romantic leads and several gray-haired characters) arranged halo-like around a framed portrait of Frank Capra declare that Capra has created "his most stirring human spectacle" out of "the hearts of its people, the very soil of America."⁴¹ One series of ads for *You Can't Take It With You* feature a similar portrait arrangement and promise that

⁴¹ For an example of this type of advertisement for *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, see *Motion Picture Herald*, September 23, 1939, 34.

“You’ll love them all.”⁴² Another reproduces an image from the last scene of the film in which the whole extended Vanderhof/Sycamore/Carmichael clan, having now adopted the Kirbys family as well, are gathered around the dinner table, heads bowed in prayer. The text below this image reads: “If our picture makes the world just a little better place to live in, that’s all we ask. As for the rest...we leave it up to YOU.”⁴³

Audience members appear to have responded to such encouragement of participatory relationships with the films. A reviewer from the *Los Angeles Times* notes that the Sycamore family “might be your next door neighbors,”⁴⁴ and a married couple, unable to settle a debate over what type of food a character was eating in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, decided to take it up directly with Frank Capra and wrote him a letter; Capra responded, and the story made the papers.⁴⁵ That Capra frequently sent personal replies to fan mail is regularly mentioned in the period press, and archival material supports this—Capra’s collection of personal papers includes multiple folders of fan mail, along with notes from the director, dictating a response that was presumably typed and sent. This element of Capra’s genial public persona, along with the participatory extra-filmic materials seem to have given many viewers a feeling of approachability to the director, as well as a sense of personal investment and identification with the films. Much of Capra’s

⁴² For an example of this type of advertisement for *You Can’t Take It With You*, see *The Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1938, 14.

⁴³ For an example of this type of advertisement for *You Can’t Take It With You*, see *Motion Picture Herald*, September 6, 1938, 46.

⁴⁴ Edwin Schallert. “You Can’t Take It With You Prize-Winning Film Event,” *Los Angeles Times*. October 1, 1938, A7.

⁴⁵ “Quail Luncheon in Film Promotes Friendly Wager,” *Los Angeles Times*. May 10, 1936, C2.

fan letters look like what one might expect—praising various films, actors, and so on—but in many letters, the authors express a surprisingly personal response to the world and characters depicted in the films. Librarians and pharmacists write to Capra to dissect his portrayal of their professions, a man with a twitch expresses his disappointment that a comical character in *You Can't Take It With You* has a similar affliction, expressing a feeling that Capra's films have importance and aim to represent American people honestly and the letter writers' worlds as they actually were. The political aspects or presumed "messages" of Capra's films are also personally malleable, with different viewers interpreting the same films in drastically different fashions in order to align with their particular viewpoints; conservatives and progressives write to thank Capra for showing their side of things, lamenting those who do not agree with them, often expressing hope that Capra's films will help the other side change their minds. In the extra-textual, as well as textual, world of Capra pictures, social stratification and boundaries appear far less distinct, whether it be the social boundaries between characters in the films, the boundary between fictional representation and lived reality, between Hollywood director and moviegoer.

In all of these films, Capra presents communities formed among very different individuals by both choice and circumstance, emphasizing the importance of the community to the individual and vice versa. Jefferson Smith is a young, optimistic small-town man suddenly dropped in among bitter and corrupt gray-haired politicians and learns to make alliances—between the teenage senate page, a cynical female aide and, eventually, the elderly senior senator from Smith's home state—in his attempts to stop a

bill that would prevent positive things from happening in Smith's small town community. Longfellow Deeds is so popular in his community that when he leaves town, everyone gathers in a parade to see him off. "Gosh, I've got a lot of friends," he remarks. He eventually creates a community of farmers, giving each of 1,200 families 10 acres, livestock, seed and equipment. John Doe creates a family wherever he goes and in whatever circumstances—among the reporters sequestered in the hotel room with him, among the hobos traveling the rails and, eventually, like Deeds, among groups of disillusioned and desperate people across the country. The importance of family, formed by whatever means, cannot be understated. These communities are multi-generational, multi-class, multi-ethnic and even, occasionally, multi-race.

Race, too, is another aspect of Capra's films that letter writers felt compelled to discuss. Although Capra's films of the period only included three small parts played by African-Americans, two in *You Can't Take It With You* and one in *It's a Wonderful Life*, the director received quite a bit of fan mail focused on these portrayals. Several African-Americans wrote to express personal gratitude to Capra for his inclusion of Eddie Anderson and Lillian Yarbo in the ensemble cast of *You Can't Take It With You*, many asking for more such representations from the director. A fan named Johnnie Weaver writes: "In giving 'actors' of our groupe [sic] better parts, it will create better 'good will' between all groupes. It also proves that men of your ability are leading the way to true democracy in giving all groupes opportunity. As true democracy begins in the 'hearts of

men.”⁴⁶ Other fans, of unannounced race also praise Capra’s use of African-American actors, asking as well for additional representation, two writers even requesting that Capra make a film dealing directly with the race situation in America. Once again this emphasizes the importance many viewers seemed to place on Capra’s films as representational and influential documents of popular culture, as well as the sense of inclusivity these films appear to have encouraged, an aspect that was apparently quite appealing to many members of the audience.

An important textual element, though, is that all of the heroic young leads of Capra’s films of this period credit their dedication to community and belief in inclusion and responsibility to others as having been learned, in part, from the examples of community elders. In the case of Jefferson Smith, he is inspired by the work of his deceased father, and Longfellow Deeds too credits his deceased parents for having looked after their local community long before he took up the responsibility and expanded it to the whole nation. John Doe is inspired initially by the sentiments of his girlfriend’s father and then is further touched and spurred to action by the example of the John Doe Club members, many of whom are older figures. Fittingly, the most prolific community-builder of all, is Grandpa Vanderhof in *You Can’t Take It With You*. Vanderhof, voluntarily retired for thirty years, has created within his New York brownstone an eclectic extended family. His family includes his daughter the playwright, her husband the fireworks manufacturer, their daughter the ballerina, her husband the

⁴⁶ Fan letter to Frank Capra from Johnnie Weaver. See Box 4, Folder: *You Can’t Take It With You* Correspondence February, 1939. Included in the Frank Capra Collection at Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT.

Southern candy-maker and admirer of the Communist Party, the other granddaughter the stenographer, an African-American cook and her husband who's on relief, an elderly toymaker, another elderly man whose occupation is unclear and a Russian dance instructor. All live together, along with a litter of kittens and a pet crow, in apparent harmony. Outside of the brownstone, everyone (a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-class mixture) in the neighborhood addresses Vanderhof as "Grandpa" and looks to him as the community patriarch, asking for advice and reassurance. When taken to jail, Vanderhof befriends the drunks, encouraging them all to join him in a rendition of "Polly Wolly Doodle;" in the courtroom, the packed audience is made up of Vanderhof's friends, who spontaneously collect the bail money needed to return him to their community. The judge, another elder figure, remarks at one point to the bailiff, "I didn't know anybody had so many friends."

The emphasis on friendship, particularly across generational and class lines, is key to the vision of an ideal family-like community expressed within these films, with elder figures at the heart. Grandpa Vanderhof has developed his values and ethics through decades of experience and, with the intent of sparing others from making the same mistaken value judgments he made in his youth (working thirty years for a company and believing "that was all there was"), he works to spread what he has learned and to put his re-centered values into action, as a socially active and politically conscious father figure to his community. Other elder figures follow suit—in *Meet John Doe* Barbara Stanwyck's mother is continuously off to look after the children and sick members of her neighborhood, spending the little money that she is given from her

daughter's income on their care, and in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* jaded senior senator (Claude Rains) is shaken from his years of cynicism by the heartfelt actions of his contemporary's son, Jefferson Smith, and those of the pre-adolescent Boy Rangers. Younger adults, like Jefferson Smith, Longfellow Deeds, Ann Mitchell or John Doe develop their ethics in large part from listening to their elders, respecting their wisdom and learning second-hand from their experience. The younger adults then carry on such ethics in their actions, causing much-needed widespread benefit within their community. Such actions may not be possible for the elder figures to accomplish on their own, it seems, but the younger adults also credit the smaller-scale examples of their elders as inspirational and foundational to their own actions and their close relationships to elder figures are often a major feature that defines such characters, suggesting that their values come from a particular familial source. Additionally, children pass in and out of scenes, interacting with all levels of generation, such as the Boy Rangers who rally their state and then the country to support Jefferson Smith or the immigrant children who teach Tony Kirby (James Stewart) and Alice Sycamore (Jean Arthur) to do a dance called "The Big Apple," which is in turn performed by Anthony Kirby and Grandpa Vanderhof in the final scene of *You Can't Take It With You*—the inclusion of children completes a complex system of influence and exchange among different generations and station within the community. Care for the community must be taken on by the all kinds of community members to be successful and this value of shared responsibility and concern is kept alive through both action and instruction. In short, everyone has a part to play and must play it because of their responsibility to everyone else.

Looking at the particular representation of community on display throughout these pictures, it is not difficult to speculate why, at their historical moment, Capra's films found such popularity with American audiences. Capra's "social-minded films" (as he referred to them) directly address the overwhelming fear facing so many people in all parts of the country—that their families and communities were under persistent threat of collapse. Capra's films present a soothing response, acknowledging that problems within American society are present, but promising that a simple solution exists and is easily achieved. It lies in the "one rule" that Jefferson Smith extols passionately before collapsing to the Senate floor: "Love thy neighbor." Such simplicity is attractive and reassuring and these films promise that there is great reward—warmth, fun, companionship—in putting this solution to work, in all taking on responsibility, in all looking out for each other.

But the portraits of family and community are more than merely idealized. In true "Capraesque" fashion, the films actively feed into nostalgia, even at the time. Characters reference the works and deeds of prominent eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Abraham Lincoln—and when, as commonly happens, characters join in song, their choices are straight out of traditional American songbooks. Everyone in New York seemingly sings along to "Polly Wolly Doodle" at some point, while in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* Babe Bennett (Jean Arthur) and Longfellow Deeds break the ice over a "Swanee River" duet, ending, it should be noted, with the final line: "I love the old folks at home." The nostalgic factor is important in the context of elders, the family, and the community. As far back as his 1922 study,

Abraham Epstein was singling out the ills of modernity as being one of the culprits for the numbers of elders who found themselves without a familial safety net.

Conditions of impotence in old age are augmented still further by the break up of the family unit in modern society. With increasing rapidity, home-ties and family solidarity are being weakened and broken by the mobility so essential to modern industrial development. [...] And as a result, one finds that the only source which [sic] secured sustenance and bare comfort to old age, in an earlier society, has disappeared for a great many. We, therefore, send these unfortunate, in our laissez-faire fashion, to the unfriendly poorhouses to secure the care and comforts available.⁴⁷

Capra's pictures play to this distrust of mobility and the threat of individuals left rootless and without family by offering the exact opposite. Characters sing the virtues of small towns and small town life, expressing distaste for city life. Longfellow Deeds spits on Times Square, Babe Bennett speaks of her desire to go back to the small town where her mother and family still live, and Grandpa Vanderhof, though he lives in New York city, has managed to create his own small-town-like community on his block and has three generations of family rooted in his brownstone. All of these sentiments, combined with the representations of ideal families and communities, sell the idea of a "better" time when families stuck together rather than deserted each other and when, if one was hurting, their community could be counted upon for support. They harken back to the days of the Elks and the community chest while neglecting to address the reasons why such institutions had to be replaced. They present a lovingly detailed and warmly attractive Norman Rockwell-like image of Community revitalized and re-anointed with authority. Included in this image are portraits of elder figures who too are given back their vitality, authority and respect within their communities. In the 1930s, when 25% of

⁴⁷ Epstein (1922), 6-7.

the working population was unemployed and many more were forced to depend upon charity and government relief, elder Americans were not the only audience members who might find this fantasy personally appealing.⁴⁸ The redemption of the respect of elders, even within the confines of a handful of comedic films, is symbolic of the redemption of the respect of the nation at large.

Old Age in American Postwar Culture

If so much of the success of Capra's films in their time is dependent upon, as Robert Sklar puts it, Capra's status as "a unique creator of entertainments that gave Americans a pleasing and convincing image of themselves," then one must wonder what changed in the 1940s so that the images Capra continued to present no longer seemed quite so pleasing or convincing.⁴⁹ One major factor to take into account, of course, is the United States' entry into World War II. As millions of able-bodied men left the continent to fight the war, domestic environments were radically affected. For example, while public opinion polls throughout the 1930s showed as high as 80-90% public disapproval of married women who held jobs, by 1942 only 13% objected.⁵⁰ The reason behind this change is simple—during the Depression a married woman holding a job was perceived as just another contributing factor to the unemployment (and disgrace) of able-bodied

⁴⁸ Lois Gordon and Alan Gordon. *The Columbia Chronicles of American Life: 1910-1992* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 221.

⁴⁹ Robert Sklar. "The Imagination of Stability: The Depression Films of Frank Capra," In *Frank Capra: The Man and His Films*, edited by Richard Glatzer and John Raeburn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 122.

⁵⁰ Peter Filene. *Him/Her/Self: Sex Roles in Modern America*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 161-162.

men. During wartime, however, jobs were not scarce but able-bodied men were. It was a woman's patriotic duty to fill their place and keep the economy rolling if she was able. A similar public change of heart seems to have taken place with the matter of America's elder citizens. As Andrew Achenbaum notes, one of the arguments among Congress members that helped to influence the passage of the original Social Security Act in 1935 was that it would encourage more elders to retire, thus opening up jobs for some of the masses of unemployed younger adult men.⁵¹ Yet the many restrictions limiting eligibility for Social Security prior to its 1939 expansion helped to discourage any large wave of voluntary retirements from occurring. Once the expansions of 1939 began to go into effect in the early 1940s, this may have become a more likely scenario. The switch to the wartime economy, however, again delayed any such occurrence. Achenbaum writes that

Data collected by the Social Security Board indicate [...] that the gradual but long-term decline in labor force participation rates among men over sixty-five was interrupted by the needs of the wartime economy. Officials noted that skilled workers postponed retirement and deferred benefits under Title II's insurance provisions.⁵² Some previously retired workers rejoined the work force.⁵³

Achenbaum notes that, despite the intentions of some of the supporters of Social Security that it should be used by employers to impose mandatory retirement at age sixty-five, such actions were delayed due to wartime needs.

The overwhelming (even if short-term) need for skilled and unskilled employees during the war made the aged a far more valuable resource than they had seemed in the midst of the Great Depression. Since the law did not require them to stop working, older workers behaved like younger

⁵¹ Achenbaum (1983), 46.

⁵² "Title II" refers to the 1939 expansions of the "Title I" Social Security Act of 1935.

⁵³ Achenbaum (1983), 49.

members of society. Those who had skills and talents to offer contributed to the patriotic cause as they saw fit.⁵⁴

Older Americans who stayed home but who were part of formal or informal extended families presumably found themselves with a renewed sense of responsibility and social contribution as well, for children were commonly left in the care of other family members or neighbors as women took up their patriotic duty to join the workforce.

Elaine Tyler May notes that “Public funds were not allocated for day care centers until 1943, and even then, the centers provided care for only 10% of the children who needed it.”⁵⁵ Without assistance from governmental entities, elder relatives and neighbors stepped in to fill the need.

Despite the continued value of older workers and extended family members during the wartime years, domestic media encouraged focus on the prosperous years that lay ahead, when such communal efforts would no longer be necessary. May’s historical study, *Homeward Bound*, details a number of propagandistic efforts, whether supported directly by government funding or merely the output of private institutions closely attuned to the government’s sentiments, that promote the salvation of a happy future as the purpose of all domestic and military war efforts, not the return to pre-war life. This happy future, perhaps designed to transport American fantasies as far from the pre-war Depression as possible, repeatedly emphasizes that once Americans win the war, they’ll be free to marry, have many children, and move out to a brand-new home in non-urban paradise. There is a peculiar mixture of the lure of the modern and nostalgia, as heard in

⁵⁴ Achenbaum (1983), 50.

⁵⁵ May (2008), 58.

one government-sponsored ad which aired frequently on radio during 1942 in which a young man proclaims that the war effort is about “young people, like us. About love and getting’ hitched and havin’ a home and some kids, and breathin’ fresh air out in the suburbs. About livin’ and workin’ decent, like free people.”⁵⁶ Statistics show that Americans during the war were marrying younger and having children earlier and in greater numbers than they had in the previous four decades, despite the disruptions of men leaving for war and women leaving for the workplace. Though earnings by those who remained in the workforce during the war years were higher than any time in recent memory, discretionary spending remained fairly flat. When polled, many bank depositors indicated that they were saving their money to spend on “future needs” and the home. There was even a popular market for “dream home” scrapbooks in which consumers could records plans and ideas for their future homes.⁵⁷

Government policies following the end of the war would help to make these dreams attainable in some form to many Americans. Responding in part to a massive shortage of housing faced by returning veterans and their eagerly expanding young families, programs like the Veterans Administration and the Federal Housing Authority offered guaranteed low-interest mortgages to veterans and incentives and backing for real estate investors and employers who developed land outward from congested city centers. More American families became homeowners in 1946 than in any time prior.⁵⁸ Such opportunities were not equal among Americans, however, or even among war veterans.

⁵⁶ May (2008), 51.

⁵⁷ May (2008), 150.

⁵⁸ May (2008), 152.

GI Bill benefits were not extended to female war veterans and though they nominally included male African-American veterans, they were not guaranteed the same federal loan insurance as their white counterparts, and red-lining policies largely kept even affluent African-Americans confined to urban areas where industries were rapidly closing up shop and heading for the government-subsidized expanses of the suburbs.

Also among those largely excluded from this migration of American families were elders. Following the return of the veterans, many employers began to impose again, in a number of fashions, mandatory retirement policies. Coupled with the Social Security expansions put into effect prior to the war, older workers' savings from the employment-rich war years, a new market for supplemental retirement plans, and changes to labor law which allowed employers to offer pension benefits in lieu of wage increases, these resulted in a new class of "retirees" with their own means of adequate, if not often generous, support. Additionally, Andrew Achenbaum notes that the original Social Security Act, "Title I," prohibited residents of poorhouses from receiving benefits, but did not mention residents of "rest homes," thus indirectly financing a boom in construction of private elder retirement care facilities.⁵⁹ If one returns for a moment to the advice columnist who in 1939 advised the young newlywed to ditch her dependent elder family members but offered no solution to the economic difficulties that kept the woman from doing so, it can be seen that, just a few years later, solutions did exist.

Increasingly, the nuclear family was promoted as the "normal," or more ideal family structure than the earlier extended family. Even the architecture of the new

⁵⁹ Achenbaum (1983), 40.

suburban tract homes seemed to be designed with only young nuclear families in mind. The typical three bedroom/one bath Cape Cod or Ranch did not encourage occupant flexibility in the same way that rambling farmhouses and Victorians or even cubby-hole-rich bungalows had. The ideal American family now was young, independently homesteaded, luxuriously isolated on its “ranch” spread. Houses, like those in Levittown, were often designed around the spacious, private yard, demarcating the play territory of children and featuring picture windows for housewives to keep an eye on them. Socializing outside of the home seems to have been designed into the layout of such neighborhoods as something that should only ever happen with deliberate effort. This includes socializing only by choice with neighbors, of course, one of the selling features of suburban over urban living environments, but also relatives and elders.

The question of the defined familial space of grandparents and other elders was so clearly in a transitional state that sociologist Belle Boon Beard put together a study in 1949 entitled “Are the Aged Ex-Family?” In this paper, Beard muses that, “If elderly couples and grandparents are not families or members of families, what are they? Obviously they were once considered members of families. When and how did they lose their family status? At what age or under what circumstances do people become ex-family?”⁶⁰ She seeks to answer this question through a survey of contemporary sociological studies of the American family and notes over the course of her survey that elders are seldom mentioned in such studies and when they are they are almost uniformly

⁶⁰ Belle Boone Beard. “Are the Aged Ex-Family?: An Inquiry into the Place of the Aged in Family Life with Special Reference to the Treatment of the Aged in Sociology Textbooks on the Family,” *Social Forces* 27.3 (March, 1949): 274.

mentioned as an inconvenience, of which growing numbers of families feel they should not be expected to bear the burden. Most interesting is Beard's exploration of the changing definition of family and its exclusion of anyone beyond a single generational level of parent and child. Though the term "nuclear family" had been in use for some time among anthropologists, it does not seem to have come into popular or even sociological field use at the time of Beard's paper.⁶¹ She points out that terminology has changed—though elders had previously been included in the more general term "family," it no longer seemed to encompass them. She writes:

Some authors call this the "natural" or "biological" family. In order to include grandparents or other older relatives, one must use such a term as "extended family" or "great family." No one has defined precisely the point at which a parent ceases to be a member of the family and becomes an "extension" of the family.[...] "The family" has apparently come to be synonymous with marriage and the rearing of children.⁶²

That this change in the meaning of "family" and the status of elder relatives was noteworthy enough to be of interest to sociologists points toward the idea that, along with the many other large scale changes affecting so many Americans in the postwar years, there were also shifts in the cultural conceptions of family and community and the place of elders within these.

⁶¹ Some sources attribute the popularization of the term "nuclear family" to sociologist Talcott Parsons's and Neil Smelser's work *Economy and Society: A Study In the Integration of Economic and Social Theory* (Glenview, IL:Free Press, 1956), though I've been unable to confirm this.

⁶² Beard (1949), 275.

Capra as a Case Study Postwar

It is in this transitional period of redefinition and re-imagining that Frank Capra released his two commercial feature films of the war years. Their content shows an interesting negotiation of values regarding family and community, and offer, if not an explanation, some points for consideration in the matter of the shifting values of Americans post-war and changes in the reception of Frank Capra's films.

Arsenic and Old Lace (1944) is in many ways an atypical Capra film in relation to the others already discussed. The film, produced for Warner Brothers, was the first picture Capra made after leaving Columbia and his last project before joining the Signal Corps where he devoted his attention to the production of the films now known as *Why We Fight*, a US propaganda and military recruitment series. Though Capra completed *Arsenic and Old Lace* in 1941, the film was not released commercially until 1944 due to a contractual agreement with the producers of the stage play that required that the film be held for release until the play had finished its run on Broadway. Released by a different studio during a time in which Capra had been off the scene for three years, advertisements for the film promote it as less a Frank Capra picture than a vehicle for Cary Grant, though Capra's name remains above the title. It was also, despite the presence of the two actresses largely credited with the success of the play on Broadway and popular character actors Raymond Massey and Peter Lorre, not sold as an ensemble. The tone of the comedy, as well, is different from the humane, social comedy of Capra's post-1935 work—this picture plays much more as broad farce. In some sense the film is a return to the screwball comedy of *It Happened One Night* (1934), though it does take on

in a very direct manner, the problem of what to do with unwanted and uncared for aging members of society.

At the center of the picture is Mortimer Brewster (Cary Grant), a theater critic who moonlights as a relationship writer and is famous for his many anti-marriage/pro-bachelorhood publications. As the film opens, however, Mortimer has had a change of heart and, undercover in sunglasses and a hat, marries the literal girl next door Elaine Harper (Priscilla Lane), daughter of the local minister. Eager to depart for his honeymoon and to start his new life with Elaine, Mortimer returns to his home to share the news with his two elderly aunts, Abby (Josephine Hull) and Martha (Jean Adair), who raised him and his two brothers and who apparently still oversee the household. Abby and Martha, are, according to the neighborhood beat cops, pillars of their community through the self-initiated works of charity they perform. These include taking the children of ill or over-worked mothers to the pictures and, most notably, inviting lonely old men into their home so that they can provide them with a good meal and some conversation. Such elder figures at first would seem to fit easily into Capra's established diegetic America. Like Anne Mitchell's mother or Longfellow Deeds's father, they are elders who perform beneficial roles in the community that are otherwise overlooked and, like Grandpa Vanderhof, they are respected and beloved by their neighbors. Abby and Martha are revealed to be quite different, however, when Mortimer discovers that when they invite the lonely old men in for dinner, they poison them and bury their bodies in the cellar.

Confused at his horrified reaction, Abby and Martha patiently explain their rationale to Mortimer. The first "lonely gentleman" who came to visit died at the table of

natural causes. The expression on his face struck them as so peaceful that they decided, “if we could help other lonely old men to find that peace, then we would.” The film successfully pokes fun at the Capraesque messages of loving thy neighbor and looking out for the community so familiar from his previous pictures and this may have added an additional level of humor for audiences, who showed their appreciation for *Arsenic and Old Lace* at the box office. Such speculation is difficult to confirm from reviews of the film, though, which praise it for the humor it provides but don’t explicitly parse out exactly why it is funny. Much of the humor lies in unexpectedly reversing what appears to be charitable community action, as well as in turning “sweet old ladies” into warped, murderous figures who view their poisoning of old men as “a mercy”—yet keeping everything ‘light’ and safely in farcical mode. That this is presented to the public as a “Frank Capra” picture may merely add another amusing or ironic layer.

The film may as well have connected with the public for its deconstruction of the image of the ideal, likeable extended family at a moment, near the end of the war, in which American interests seem to be switching from the problematic, stuck-together extended families of the present to the idealized nuclear families of the future. In addition to the burden of figuring out what to do with his aunts, Mortimer must also deal with his two brothers: Teddy (John Alexander), who has been living peacefully with Grant and his aunts despite his belief that he is Teddy Roosevelt and Jonathan (Raymond Massey), a violent serial killer who returns to the family home while laying low from the law. As he grapples with the increasingly difficult and bewildering situation, all the while pining to

run off with his new spouse, Mortimer becomes a nightmare version of the advice columnist's letter writer.

It is not, however, economic factors that trap Mortimer in this bind. Rather, it is his responsibility to his extended family members. He cannot leave on his own pursuits until he makes sure that his aunts and his two troubled brothers are properly looked after. The solutions that Mortimer winds up with seem utterly suited to the nuclear era. Jonathan is handled most easily, as he is arrested and, presumably, sent off to spend the rest of his days incarcerated or executed by the State. After much wheeling and dealing with various officials, Grant manages to have Teddy committed to Happy Dale, a sanitarium. Notably, when the cab driver refers to Happy Dale as a “nuthouse,” the director of the sanitarium corrects him: “We prefer to call it a ‘rest home.’” This semantic exchange acts as a give-away to the next development as the problem of Mortimer's elderly aunts and their care is soon solved for him. Fearing that Teddy will be lonely without his family, Abby and Martha request that they too be sent away to the Happy Dale “rest home.” Within a single 24-hour period, Mortimer's entire problematic extended family has been successfully sent away and out of sight. Finally, as an unintentional parting gift of sorts, Mortimer's aunts inform him that he is not actually related to any of them at all—he is adopted and all of his family is dead. With this statement (and his jubilant reaction to it) Mortimer is freed from any responsibility at all to his extended family, free to go off and pursue his own nuclear family if he desires. The last scene of the film shows Mortimer joyfully carrying his bride over the threshold of her home, symbolically beginning their new life. What is to become of the bodies in

the Brewster home basement is never mentioned. Those “lonely old men” are not related to him and therefore, it seems, not his problem.

While the reversal of the Capraesque presentation of ‘family’ in *Arsenic and Old Lace* is unexpected, its portrayal of generational relationships and elder figures is also surprising. Rather than learning from his elders or even communicating on an equal adult level with them, Mortimer is clearly more knowledgeable about the workings of the world while his aunts are characterized as naïve. A similar relationship that takes place is the recurring appearance of the local, older beat cop who is training a younger cop to take his place. While the younger cop is played as a bit foolish for misinterpreting countless signals of what is really going on in the Brewster home, the older cop is even more of a buffoon, having missed the killings for years. Whereas older figures in previous Capra films might have passed their wisdom on to younger generational figures, here they stand to pass on only dangerous naïveté. The portrayal of the elderly aunts in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, however, is the most curious. On the one hand, they’ve intentionally committed murder twelve times. On the other hand, as they explain it, they had a perfectly logical rationale for doing so and performed a service to the community, rather than a grievous act. The fact that no consequence is ever faced regarding the bodies in the basement seems, to some extent, to validate their belief that they have not actually hurt anyone. Like so many Capra characters, they are eccentrics. But whereas eccentrics like Grandpa Vanderhoff or Longfellow Deeds are shown doing good for the community they also do no harm. Whether Abby and Martha can be classed as “loveable eccentrics” in the same

fashion or should be considered something akin to dementia characterized—walking social problems—is an unsettling question raised by the film.

There is something similarly unsettling in the portrayal of elders in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Most memorable, perhaps, is the bitter, greedy Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore), but there is also Uncle Billy (Thomas Mitchell) as a bumbling, forgetful alcoholic, Mr. Gower (H.B. Warner) as a pharmacist who is so incapable of controlling his emotions following the news of his son's death that he nearly poisons a sick child, and Clarence (Henry Travers) as an angel so bad at his job that he has worked for 89 years and still not received his wings. There is also, in great contrast to earlier elder characters in Capra's films, a startling acknowledgement of the frailties of old age. Peter Bailey (Samuel S. Hinds) works himself to illness and dies of a heart attack, Mr. Gower (in George's alternate reality Pottersville) is seen destitute, insane, mocked by the local townspeople and literally kicked onto the ground. Lionel Barrymore, whose real-life infirmity was given a playful gloss in *You Can't Take It With You*, is pushed throughout *It's a Wonderful Life* in a wheel chair with his affliction openly attributed in part to his age. These are not, by and large, fantastical portrayals of older people.

Generational interactions are also presented with more shading. It is twelve-year-old George Bailey (Bobbie Anderson) who points out to Warner that he has prepared the wrong medicine for the sick child and receives a beating for his insolence before Gower realizes the boy is right and tearfully apologizes. Potter fails in his attempts to forge a fatherly relationship with Peter Bailey in order to secure power over the Savings and Loan and does so again when he attempts to do the same thing with George Bailey

(James Stewart) many years later. At one point, George is openly frustrated with his small children and yells at them, even making his daughter cry; at another, a neighbor remarks to George and his wife (Donna Reed) with disgust that “Youth is wasted on the young,” expressing disappointment as well as generational divide. At the height of his desperation, George lashes out at his elders, calling Mr. Potter a “warped, frustrated old man” and Uncle Billy “a silly old fool.” At the same time, though, young George grows to have quite a close relationship with Gower and his love and respect for his father is clear, from his childhood defense of Peter Bailey after the latter is insulted by Potter at a board meeting, to the quiet adult exchange over dinner in which George tells his father “You’re the best man I know.”

George’s adult defense of his father after the now-deceased man is again insulted by Potter at a board meeting, so reminiscent of Jefferson Smith’s impassioned defense of his father’s ethical legacy on the Senate floor, is one of the many moments that do work to mark this film as a return to “Capra” form. Completed in 1946, *It’s a Wonderful Life* was the first commercially released film that Capra worked on since devoting himself fulltime to the production of *Why We Fight*. *It’s a Wonderful Life* was also the first picture to be released for Liberty, Capra’s own production house. Capra seems to have in many ways been eager to mark his return with an ambitious, lavishly budgeted project very much in the mode of his earlier hits and different from the quickly churned-out un-Capra-like *Arsenic and Old Lace* with its stagy sets, glamorous male lead, and farcical humor. Many of the cast members from Capra’s 1930s films show up in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and they populate an elaborately detailed small town, often framed in symbolic

placement, and indulging in warm, humane humor. The romantic leads even fall in love while singing a nineteenth-century folk song, “Buffalo Gals.”

What gives the film away more than any other factor, though, as a Capra production is the return to themes about the individual’s responsibility to the community. In the most basic sense, the film is about George’s realization that the community of Bedford Falls is important to him and he to it. It is interesting, though, that he does not already “know” this from the start of the film, as Longfellow Deeds and Jefferson Smith before him had so much of their very character rooted in their valuing of the community. George is different not only in his having overlooked the value of his community but in the outright disdain he holds for it at times. He has individualistic goals, wishing more than anything to travel, see the world and design buildings for big cities. His ambitions seem appropriate for the expanded sense of the world that World War II brought to many Americans and the highly mobilized age that was beginning, with its expansion of interstate highways, commercial air travel and the freedom of leaving “the old neighborhood” behind.

George is ultimately forced back from these individualistic ambitions into proper Capra hero mode, coming to a new understanding of the value of family and community and the individual’s responsibilities to both. It takes the combined efforts of the entire Bedford Falls community as well as literal divine intervention to accomplish this, however, since the responsibilities of family and community life have been systematically interfering with George’s goals all his life. At the age of twelve, George is made partially deaf as a result of his responsibility to look after his younger brother.

When he employs his better sense and tells Gower he has made a dangerous mistake, George is beaten for it. On the cusp of achieving romantic love and his lifelong dream of world travel, George's father dies and responsibility to look after his mother and the community through stewardship of the Savings and Loan take precedence. As George is preparing, four years later to pass on these responsibilities to his younger brother Harry (Tom Karns), he is thwarted by Harry's desire to leave the community and start a nuclear family. As a consolation prize of sorts, George is given a nuclear family of his own, though he still lives a short distance from his widowed mother, oversees his father's business, keeps his elderly uncle employed, and remains deeply involved in the affairs of the community. Community responsibilities even interfere when George and his new wife attempt to leave the town for a brief honeymoon downstate—he is called upon to stop a bank run and even donates his honeymoon budget to help keep the people of the town temporarily afloat. Once again, George is given a consolation prize: the community pulls together to arrange a honeymoon for the newlyweds, one in which they needn't even leave Bedford Falls. Instead, they have the pleasure of looking at pictures of distant places inside their damp, crumbling home while the local cab driver serenades them.

Throughout the picture, other people leave Bedford Falls, see the world, have adventures in the War, and start their own nuclear families—a new suburban development of young families, Bailey Park, is even named in George's honor—yet George stays behind, weighted down with responsibilities. The greatest instance of this occurs when Uncle Billy's forgetful oversight results in the loss of an \$8,000 deposit, and it is George who bears responsibility for accounting for it. Unwilling to abandon his

responsibilities to the Savings and Loan and to his family, George decides that only his suicide, and the insurance policy money associated with his death, will save them. In this case it is the community, though not George's dependent family, who sacrifice to fulfill their responsibility to him. They come together to call on God to help George spiritually and put together a collection to help him out financially.

The film more than acknowledges the move toward nuclear homesteads following the end of the Depression. George's brother, of course, marries a girl from college and sets up an independent life out of town. George and his wife don't do what might be the most frugal option and move in with widowed Mrs. Bailey, despite her home being large enough to operate as a boarding house in the Pottersville reality. Instead, the Baileys set up their own home, though it is naturally right within the heart of Bedford Falls.

The messages about family and community in *It's a Wonderful Life* are, upon scrutiny, somewhat mixed. The film paints a rather grim picture of an individual driven to desperation and suicidal rage by the pressures of community and familial responsibilities. Yet, the ending of the film finds George even more tightly enclosed in community life, though he is now divinely manipulated to appreciate it rather than find it oppressive. Joyous over this development, the whole community joins in singing "Auld Land Syne," a traditional folk ballad with roots in an 18th century poem. It was, perhaps, not the most appealing way to end a film in the forward-looking culture of America in 1947.

Although the response to *It's a Wonderful Life* upon its release was not as dismal as legend might lead one to believe—it was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, received many positive reviews, and was hardly a complete bomb at the box

office—the film was disappointing by the standards Capra had come to expect as a director. The picture had been given a fairly large production, around \$3 million, yet only returned \$3.3 million, not enough to keep Liberty from going under shortly after.⁶³ The film was certainly perceived to have been much less celebrated, as many fan letters in Capra’s collection from the period specifically mention that the letter writer disagrees with popular sentiment that the film was not very good.

While the previous Capra pictures discussed did occasionally receive some negative reviews (most, it seems, complaining about the pictures’ two-hour plus lengths), negative reviews of *It’s a Wonderful Life* for the first time attack those elements that could be deemed part of what makes the picture “Capraesque.” In his review for *The New York Times*, Bosley Crowther, wrote that “the weakness of this picture, from this reviewer’s point of view, is the sentimentality of it — its illusory concept of life. Mr. Capra’s nice people are charming, his small town is a quite beguiling place and his pattern for solving problems is most optimistic and facile. But somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities.”⁶⁴

In *The Nation* James Agee was far less diplomatic. Though he admits that the film has “a good deal of charm and quality,” he argues:

Much too often this film appeals to the heart at the expense of the mind; at other times it urgently demands of the heart that it treat with contempt the mind’s efforts to keep its integrity; at still other times the heart is simple used, on the mind, as a truncheon. [...] I mistrust, for instance, any work which tries to persuade me—or rather, which assumes that I assume—that

⁶³ Charles J. Maland. *Frank Capra* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 155.

⁶⁴ Bosley Crowther. “The Screen in Review,” *The New York Times*, December 23, 1946, 19.

there is so much good in nearly all the worst of us that all it needs is a proper chance and example, to take complete control.⁶⁵

Both of these reviews suggest that there was something false in Capra's presentation of America and that his particular brand of social-moral vision had begun to read as offensively simplistic. Charles Maland argues that "The optimistic resolutions of his films—all presupposing the essential goodness of the common man—seemed naïve and soft-headed in an America which had gone through a brutal world war, learned of the concentration camp atrocities, and feared what it perceived as Soviet dreams of world domination."⁶⁶ Maland's argument certainly seems viable, but there is the additional factor that *It's a Wonderful Life's* presentation of what should be valued in America—community, small town life, helping each other out—seems woefully out-of-step with the forward-looking, consumerist, suburban-expanding culture of the postwar era. Even Agee points out that "in representing a twentieth-century American town Frank Capra uses so little of the twentieth and idealizes so much that seems essentially nineteenth-century..."⁶⁷ While such a nostalgic presentation might have been comforting to Americans in the bleak and frightening years of the Great Depression, in the postwar period the past seemed more of a weight to be discarded than anything else, much as people rapidly abandoned extended families and the old neighborhood for the conveniences of modern living and peaceful isolation of the suburbs.

⁶⁵ James Agee. "It's a Wonderful Life," *The Nation*, 164 (February 15, 1947), 193-194.

⁶⁶ Maland (1980), 146.

⁶⁷ Agee (1947), 94.

In a letter to Capra dated June 24, 1947, a moviegoer named Evelynne Carter discusses quite plainly the idea that the more Capraesque aspects of *It's a Wonderful Life* were decidedly out-of-step with postwar culture. She writes:

Not very long ago I saw your latest "It's a Wonderful Life" with James Stewart. It was done in a definite pre-war style. By that I mean, some of the scenes are somewhat corny now. Maybe about seven years ago people wouldn't have thought so, but after the avalanche of English films, I found your directorial techniques rather out-moded and infantile. As a whole, the picture wasn't bad. Taken apart, some of the scenes were downright "childish." While you have been away, the movie-goers have "grown up" with seeing so many adult, intelligent films being imported. It's about time Hollywood grew up—don't you think?⁶⁸

The sentiment that something had changed in the culture, following the end of the war, in American sensibilities and tastes, is evident, from this writer's perspective. That the letter writer characterizes the "pre-war" style of the film as juvenile is also interesting, particular in light of the subject matter that will be discussed in the following chapter.

There appears to have been an awareness that not only had American sensibilities changed in the period since the war, but also Hollywood sensibilities. Another letter writer, a Mrs. Margart Quattrini of Galveston, mentions the difference between Capra's work and other cinematic output of the period, this time praising *It's a Wonderful Life* as harkening back to more sophisticated and meaningful fare. She writes:

I'm a movie fan of 32. Not that you're interested in that, but I consider it the age of discernment and it also have something to do with my disgust with present-day movies. Most shows seem to be made now for the bobby-sox trade. The musicals with no plot, the Van Johnson silly love stories, the ever-more-dull Betty Hutton films. After a diet of such movies, one feels a parched thirst for a film you can sink your teeth into. A film you can think about, can store away as a pleasant

⁶⁸ Fan letter to Frank Capra from Evelynne Carter of Dobbs Ferry, NY, dated June 24, 1947. See Box 12, Folder: *It's a Wonderful Life* fan mail June 1947 in the Frank Capra Collection at Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT.

memory. Such are few and far between. To that one is inclined to think that Hollywood can't put out the pictures they used to before the war.⁶⁹

Though both letter writers disagree about where *It's a Wonderful Life* fits into things, they both express a cognizance that it is somehow out of step with contemporary American and cinematic sensibilities, and discuss this disparity in, interestingly, generational terms.

It's a Wonderful Life celebrates nostalgia just as Americans were more interested in the prospect of moving forward. Capra who, in Maland's words, "was not one to chase the popular fads," returned after World War II to make pictures for an America that had changed, relying on the same ideas (albeit with less certainty) that had worked so successfully in the pre-war culture. Like so many members of the previous generation, Capra became quietly cast aside from the main thoroughfares of cultural activity. It does not seem coincidence that several films produced in the early postwar years, which I will discuss in the following chapter, like *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), and *Limelight* (Charles Chaplin, 1952) explicitly address the disappearance of elder figures from society and the problems associated with showing aging faces in entertainment. Capra's presentations of the active, community-integrated elder already appears dated at this point. It is as if, having "solved" the problems of the indigent elderly and the Great Depression through government schemes and the collective efforts of the War, Americans in general, and American popular culture

⁶⁹ Letter from Mrs. Margaret Quattrini of Galveston, Texas to Frank Capra, undated. See Box 12, Folder: *It's a Wonderful Life* fan mail, April 1947 in the Frank Capra Collection at Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT.

in particular, were anxious to move away from such concerns and focus on the dream of the nuclear family and its independent, modern home.

Although the focus may have shifted, anxieties about aging in America, the place of elders in society, and increasing generational divides do not disappear with the implementation of Social Security. Rather, such anxieties persist and manifest in various ways, as the following chapters demonstrate and explore.

Chapter 2

“Adult Films” for the “Lost Audience” of Postwar America

“Wake up, Norma. You’ll be killing yourself for an empty house.

The audience left twenty years ago.”

--Joe Gillis to Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*

On May 2nd, 1947, a brief piece appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* with a headline that proclaimed, “Film Officer of P.T.A. Tells Opportunity: New Audience of 35,000,000 Seen for Adult Pictures.”⁷⁰ While this statement is likely based on somewhat exaggerated claims, it is also not nearly so astonishing as it may appear at first glance. For one thing, the body of the article reveals that the headcount of this “new audience” is based, apparently, upon an estimate of the number of American citizens who chose not to be regular film attendees. This number of non-film-going Americans was indeed large and of great interest to the film industry, which had just suffered a very sharp decline in attendance. While some of these supposed “35,000,000” new customers were never likely to attend films for a variety of reasons (poverty, infirmity, language barriers, racial barriers and so on), a good number were viewed as potential customers unmet. Whereas some potential film-goers had simply never become regular attendees, others previously had been active film-goers, a group that would come to be referred to during this period as the “lost audience.”

⁷⁰ Norma H. Goodhue. “Film Officer of P.T.A. Tells Opportunity: New Audience of 35,000,000 Seen for Adult Pictures.” *Los Angeles Times*, May 2, 1947, A5.

The second part of this newspaper headline that may seem surprising is the contention that this potential audience of 35,000,000 would be lining up for “adult pictures.” If we understand the label “adult” in the sense that is now familiar—namely, as a euphemism for pornographic films—this 1947 headline may raise some eyebrows. But that is not the case. Rather, the term refers to “adult pictures” that appeal to a mature and sophisticated audience, not a juvenile audience. Such pictures may even be perceived as striving for something beyond mere entertainment and closer to art, as the content of this newspaper article goes on to show. The P.T.A. officer, one Mrs. Lee B. Hedges, working in conjunction with a study of media and popular culture by Stanford University, had been appointed to survey potential new audience members and to find out why such people were not active cinema attendees. At the completion of her survey, Mrs. Hedges concluded that this large, potential new audience stayed away because the pictures Hollywood was making did not appeal to them. The sheer number of potential audience members being overlooked, she reported, “would justify an effort on the part of producers to make better films as an art and become adult in subject matter.”⁷¹

Mrs. Hedges’s conclusions are no anomaly. They are, in fact, part of a distinct moment in postwar cinematic history in which the idea of the “adult” film occupied an important part of the public discourse. In this chapter, I look to this discourse as a manifestation of the growing generational divide that occurred during the postwar years. This discourse reveals a debate between critics, academics, educational groups, occasional members of the public, and the film industry itself, struggling to define

⁷¹ Goodhue (1947), A5.

“adults” as a separate audience from the general public, one that desired entertainment that spoke to their own interests. Exacerbating the struggle within the industry throughout the postwar years was a conception of the American audience divided into separate groups defined according to generational lines and perceived maturity. The discussion surrounding “adult” films and the “adult” audience thus reveals not only a moment of potential artistic promise but also increasing social division and flux.

In *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*, Barbara Klinger draws attention to the widespread usage of the term “adult” in the promotion of films during this period. She examines this use of “adult” specifically within the context of selling films of a singular genre, the Sirkian melodrama.

As the case of *Written on the Wind* will demonstrate, Universal-International’s exhibition practices made these connections by creating, on the one hand, a generic identity for melodramas as “adult” films in order to capitalize on increasing trends toward sexually explicit representation in the media. On the other hand, exhibition presented melodramatic style as a veritable wonderland of consumer fantasies and goods to appeal to the post-World War II affluent mentality.⁷²

While Klinger makes the connection between the usage of “adult” as a euphemism for the boundary-pushing sexual content of postwar melodramas, this does not account for the way in which “adult” is also employed in the discussion and promotion of films that do not have sexuality as a central or even secondary subject. The association of “adult” with the sexual subject matter of the women’s pictures of the 1950s certainly resembles the more contemporary understanding of the term, an important point to return to at the end of this chapter. However, the use of adult as a signifier encompassing a broad variety of

⁷² Barbara Klinger. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37.

film types (dramas, comedies, westerns, as well as romantic melodramas) is crucial to my overall argument.

In short, the discursive formation of “adult” films in the late 1940s and 1950s reveals a bold line of generational distinction being drawn, within the content of films as well as within the broader culture, as seen through the contemporary discussions of Hollywood product. Such a distinction is negotiated within these discussions, as well as through representations of elder figures struggling with changing generational roles. While the previous chapter examined early instances of the generational conflict that began to show up in Hollywood cinema during and after the implementation of Social Security, this chapter examines how these generational conflicts play out during the early postwar period. By this time, American society has worked through the trauma of the war and the financial apartness and physical separation of elders from families. These films, though, depict a cultural mood where those “discarded” elder figures—the “ex-family” citizens that Belle Boon Beard wrote about in 1949—continue, problematically, to exist in contemporary society.

In order to assess this discursive formation, its cultural function, and its role in paving the way toward elder kitsch, I first consider the historical context during which the notion of the “adult” film begins to take form in both film production and advertising, as well as in critical response. From there I examine the negotiation of generational roles at play in several “adult” pictures of the era and how they negotiate this shift in generational social roles. I also look at the promotion of two case study films, *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950),

considering the ways that, in these two particular cases, Hollywood attempted to draw in the older audience. Lastly, I will look briefly at the role “adult” films played in the dissolution of the Production Code, ultimately eliminating the need for the postwar-style adult film. What remains in the wake of this is a new conception of “adult” that negated the Eisenhower-style ideal associated with seriousness, responsibility, and experience, and, rather, embraced the sexually and socially liberal, savvy young person as the important adults within the contemporary culture, a reality that will be explored further in the final chapter of this project.

An Audience Lost

To begin examining the discourse around “adult” films and perceived audience maturity, one must first look to the economic troubles facing Hollywood studios in the years following the end of World War II. During this period, movie studios and exhibitors were facing a crisis of the “lost audience.” As Douglas Gomery has documented, “The fall in theatrical moviegoing in the United States began in the latter months of 1946 and continued steadily downward through the 1940s and into the 1950s.”⁷³ This drop in attendance was of great financial concern to the studios, exacerbated by the fact that it coincided with the Paramount Decree’s powerful damage to studio interests. The lost audience was also, of course, devastating to the exhibitors, who suffered the greatest financial repercussions from lack of ticket sales.

⁷³ Douglas Gomery. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 84.

The lost audience, however, was not solely an industry concern. The term pops up regularly in popular press articles throughout the period, and, by 1951 the industry crisis was newsworthy enough that *Life* magazine ran a feature on the loss in attendance and revenue, and consequent theater closings.⁷⁴ In the same year, Samuel Goldwyn contributed an opinion piece to *Colliers* entitled, “Is Hollywood Through?”⁷⁵ Two books that largely dealt with the subject were published at this time as well: Leo Handel’s social science study, *Hollywood Looks At Its Audience* (1950), and Gilbert Seldes’s popular press publication *The Great Audience* (1951). In 1952 *The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television* surveyed many of these recent discussions in a piece simply titled “The Lost Audience.”⁷⁶ In all of these sources, despite differing readerships, two ideas become constant: first, that Hollywood was facing a potentially catastrophic drop in movie attendance numbers, and second, that this was due, in varying ways, to Hollywood’s miscalculations of what the audience desired.

While popular accounts have attributed this historical decline in attendance to the rise of television as an alternative entertainment, Gomery points out that, in actuality, “the decline in admissions at the theatrical box office was greater from the 1946 to 1950 period than from 1950 to 1960.”⁷⁷ As televisions did not start becoming a widely owned product in American homes until the early 1950s, there must be other factors accountable. For Gomery, much of the loss can be attributed to changes in Americans’

⁷⁴ See Robert Coughlan. “Now it is Trouble That is Supercolossal in Hollywood,” *Life*, August 13, 1951, 120-124; 112-114.

⁷⁵ Samuel Goldwyn. “Is Hollywood Through?” *Colliers*, September 29, 1951, 18-19.

⁷⁶ Geoffrey Wagner. “The Lost Audience,” *The Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, 6.4 (Summer, 1952): 338-350.

⁷⁷ Gomery (1992), 84.

spending habits and priorities. Although overall American income and spending eventually rose during the postwar period, much of this spending was put toward domestic purchases people had not had the means to buy during and prior to the war. These include buying and furnishing new homes, purchasing and operating automobiles, and expanding and outfitting families to levels never before seen in American middle class history. As waves of Americans increasingly migrated out from cities and into the suburbs, they moved away from urban neighborhoods and downtown centers where movie theaters had previously been popular destinations for entertainment. As Lynn Spiegel's study *Make Room for TV* skillfully illustrates, entertainment in suburban America tended to be concentrated within the home. Advertising and women's lifestyle magazines heavily promote the purchase of pianos, record players, games tables, and later, of course, televisions to keep entertainment and families centered in the home.⁷⁸ When taken together, these factors all contribute to the phenomenon of the lost audience.

For the writers of some of the contemporary materials mentioned previously, however, there is an additional (and, certainly, related) factor that also figures into the loss of audience: age. "The members of the lost audience," Geoffrey Wagner writes in *The Quarterly of Film, Television and Radio* piece, "that influential portion of our population who are deserting the cinemas, have been analyzed as the more mature of us; their average age is thirty-five."⁷⁹ The polls and statistics in Leo Handel's study support this. Lack of attendance among the very oldest potential patrons could, Handel speculates, be assumed to result from such patrons being older than cinema itself and thus

⁷⁸ See chapter two of Spiegel (1992).

⁷⁹ Wagner (1952), 340.

not having developed the movie-going habit in their youth. Among those who make up the first generation to have grown up with the cinema, however, Handel points to a drop-off in attendance, coinciding with age.⁸⁰ He writes:

According to an estimate by Dr. J. S. List, a consulting psychologist, a fifth of the nation's theatergoers cease to be regular patrons when they reach the age of forty. List contends further that 75 per cent of the patrons are lost to the industry when they reach sixty, and 98 per cent when they reach seventy. He sees the cause for this diminishing market in the lack of understanding of adult tastes on the part of the producers, and the failure of the exhibitors to cultivate this section of the public.⁸¹

This "lack of understanding of adult tastes" is deemed the primary culprit for many of those writing about adult audiences' abandonment of the cinema. Handel concludes: "In general, the findings seem to indicate a misconception on the part of some producers who feel that they have to 'play down' to the lowest intellectual level to make a motion picture a financial success."⁸² In the mainstream press, a Pittsburgh newspaper columnist expresses similar sentiments in a less academic fashion: "The number of Hollywood movies I have seen is vast and my opinion of them is that about 95 per cent of them have a mental age of not over eight."⁸³ Similar expressions can be found throughout film

⁸⁰ Seldes quotes similar numbers in his book, attributing them to studies completed by the Audience Research Institute to which Seldes was privy. He writes: "Checks made by different researchers at different times and places turn up minor variations in percentages, but it works out that between the ages of thirty and fifty, more than half of the men and women in the United States, steady patrons of the movies in their earlier years, do not bother to see more than one picture a month; after fifty, more than half see virtually no pictures at all." See Gilbert Seldes. *The Great Audience* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1951), 12.

⁸¹ Leo Handel. *Hollywood Looks at Its Audience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 104.

⁸² Handel (1951), 107.

⁸³ J.A. Rogers. "Made-in-America Movies Have to Take Back Seat to Most Foreign Films," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 8, 1947, 6.

reviews of the time, which complain about an immaturity that seemed to mark much of the Hollywood product, reminiscent of the two Frank Capra fan letters discussed at the end of the previous chapter.

In *The Great Audience*, Gilbert Seldes makes this notion a centerpiece of his argument. He begins his book by pointing out that “No other manufacturer of a mass-consumption commodity—cigarettes, soaps, cereals, motorcars—has deliberately cut himself off from the larger part of his market. Why have the movies done so?”⁸⁴ He elaborates, noting that Hollywood films’ plots, tropes, and morals are skewed to a youthful outlook on life that decreases in relevance for audience members as they attain more life experience.

As Americans pass through the stages of courtship and begin married life, as they go to work, break from the protection and discipline of their parents, and begin to establish families of their own [...] The image of the hero, the throb of passion, the myth of success, *as conceived by the movies*, are no longer needed; and as time goes on they become unacceptable.⁸⁵

Seldes’s argument, reinforced over the course of several chapters, is that, not only are Hollywood producers losing potential income by presenting material irrelevant to this audience, but that, by doing so, they are actively damaging the audience that remains. Seldes laments a future “nation of teenagers” who have been conditioned by the media to hold youthful values throughout their lives, to never mature in their worldview because they see no accurate representation or valuation of that maturity. He assigns blame not just to the film industry but also to American popular culture *en mass*. Seldes warns against the threat of these developments, writing:

⁸⁴ Seldes (1951), 14.

⁸⁵ Seldes (1951), 22.

Nothing in the popular arts suggests to people of thirty or forty that they can safely read a book, discuss politics, bother about juvenile delinquency, go on a picket line, demonstrate against picket lines, serve on a jury in a civil suite, earn a living, or write a letter to the editor—all of these things and a thousand others are the stigmata of maturity and must be practiced in secret, if at all. The eternal juvenile takes no part in the life of the community and has no resources of his own; to the aging who wants to be as like him as they can, he offers other occupations.⁸⁶

While Seldes's fears may appear alarmist when shifted from a mere criticism of Hollywood film to dire warnings about the future of the American public, they reveal genuine concerns and anxieties brought about by the sweeping and rapid social and cultural changes occurring in the immediate postwar period, particularly those changes involving the shifting of generational roles.

Though not carrying the arguments on to so grand a scale, several prominent film critics of the time express similar discontent with the perceived immaturity of Hollywood film. Two critics in particular, Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* and Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, make continuous reference to Hollywood's lack of addressing adult audience members. In a typical piece, Mae Tinee praises the film *14 Hours* (Henry Hathaway, 1951) as rare "proof that our own motion picture industry can produce a product worthy of mature attention if the public will permit."⁸⁷ Crowther, meanwhile, had such interest in the topic that he appeared before a panel of educators in New York to speak about how "Television and motion pictures show the same tendency of catering too much to the juvenile mind," and to advocate for "the 'specialization' of

⁸⁶ Seldes (1951), 245.

⁸⁷ Mae Tinee. "20th Produces a Tense Film of Stark Realism," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1951, B4.

motion pictures to appeal to various segments of the population, instead of the traditional emphasis on mass appeal.”⁸⁸

Seldes, a cultural critic who had published frequently in periodicals like *The Atlantic* and dabbled in writing for Broadway and adapting Shakespearean plays for the screen, had a vested interest in the kinds of films being released to the American public, as well as in the kinds of media that same public was conditioned to seek out and support. Critics like Crowther and Mae Tinee were similarly invested in films for which there was an intelligent and discerning audience interested in the kinds of critiques they produced. In his case, Crowther developed a reputation for perhaps being overly invested in these debates. Letters to the Editor in the *New York Times* and even articles by Crowther’s fellow critics make frequent reference to his curmudgeon status and constant harping against Hollywood’s assumed immaturity of its audience. It is worth noting that each of these critics mentioned—Seldes, Crowther and Mae Tinee—had been publishing for several decades by this time and fell well within the bounds of this particular lost audience for which they advocated. But they were certainly not in sparse company.

The Formation of “Adult Films”

It can be difficult, particularly in retrospect, to comprehend the specific attributes tied to the label of “adult” as it was applied (and understood) by these critics. Some qualities can be linked to the term, however, when examining reviews for films praised as “adult.” A review of *Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947), for example, contains the

⁸⁸ “TV and Radio Seen on Juvenile Level: Times Writers Tell Teachers of the Need for Improving Industries’ Standard,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1951, 36.

following: “The dilemma of this woman is very disturbing and very real; it is also very commonplace, or would be if it had not been written, directed and performed with a sensitivity rare in Hollywood creation [...] a script of extraordinary depth and compassion [...] Otto Preminger has directed it with comparable taste and intelligence [...] [it is] thoughtful and adult.”⁸⁹ A review of *All My Sons* (Irving Reis, 1948), an adaptation of an Arthur Miller play, reads: “‘All My Sons,’ at the Palace, is a finely-made, adult and engrossing film. Written with integrity and acted with skill, it is a picture for the discriminating [...] The film makes virtually none of the customary attempts to relieve its tone; ‘here,’ says the film, ‘is our story.’”⁹⁰ In each of these reviews, the quality of “adult” seems to be linked to particular notions of realism, sensitivity, complexity and good taste. Other reviews similarly praise adult films as “sophisticated,” “subtle” and “intelligent.”

In *The Great Audience*, Seldes gives a more elaborate explanation that seeks to explain the definition from which he and his fellow critics are working. Following an extended section of comparison between the relative maturity and immaturity of foreign versus domestic releases, Seldes explains:

The single mark of maturity, stamped like a seal of approval on all the pictures I have mentioned, sunny or somber, is this: the story develops in humanly acceptable terms; even in farcical situations the actions are credible although we could never have predicted them; and the threads of the serious stories are woven logically into their complete pattern. Moreover, the characters are men and women, individuals not types; their motives are understandable, and the fictions

⁸⁹ Philip K Scheuer. “Daisy Kenyon Adult Loves Story With Three Stars,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 28, 1947, A13.

⁹⁰ Richard L Coe. “All My Sons Is a Powerful Film,” *The Washington Post*, June 25, 1948, C7.

in which they appear are stories not myths [...] they are not escaping from our human predicament, they are only relating the myth to our times.⁹¹

This interest in a particular kind of realism is coupled with a sense that a film's makers have assumed a certain level of intelligence in their audience and need not have character motivations, plot points and such overly explained to them. And yet, much of what Seldes describes as the mark of an adult film could presumably be applied by a critic to any quality picture. How do we differentiate these particular qualities that mark a picture as "good" because it is "adult"?

One way may be to look at how adult films seem to be discussed in terms of what they are not. Crowther, writing in 1951, gives us some idea of what is *not* appealing to this adult audience on behalf of whom he advocates:

There has been some discussion lately of Hollywood's general neglect of the so-called 'over 30' audience—the audience, that is, which one assumes is more interested in literate, adult subjects than crooners, cowboys, cover girls and crime. And in these contributive discussions, the point is frequently made that Hollywood should give more attention to the wooing and the winning of this group—this large group of people over 30 who have money, maturity, and minds.⁹²

"Crooners, cowboys, cover girls and crime" would seem to encompass a great number of popular Hollywood films at this time, from Bing Crosby vehicles and Roy Rogers pictures to the gritty, violent dramas that would later be grouped under the category of *film noir* and lauded for their complexities. In a review of *The Adventures of Hajji Baba* (Don Weis, 1954), Mae Tinee describes it as an "often ludicrous costume picture which has all the old tried and true ingredients: plenty of scantily clad girls, a buxom princess in

⁹¹ Seldes (1951), 37.

⁹² Bosley Crowther. "For the 'Over 30's': Adults in Films Do Not Mean Adult Pictures." *The New York Times*, February 4, 1951, 81.

disguise, a daring young Berber who woos her...” She ends with the explanation that “It’s the sort of motion picture that adults may find pretty rough going, but teen-agers inhale as happily as they do popcorn.”⁹³ Once again, the lines drawn between a good film and bad film, sophisticated and not, are generational. Curiously, though, the aspect of frank sexuality here, in the descriptions of the “scantly clad girls” and “buxom princesses” are markers of the non-adult, demonstrating that it is not just sexuality that is a marker of the adult film, as Klinger would argue, but that the way in which sexuality is treated can mark a film as utterly juvenile just as much as “adult.” This unsubtle treatment of sexuality, with its flesh on display for presumably, in the critic’s opinion, no purpose beyond that of ogling and titillating spectacle, reads as both juvenile *and* old-fashioned. In this respect, calls for “adult” picture are not so much calls for the entertainment styles and sensibilities of the past (or of the generations that dominated the entertainment industry of the past) but something more “modern.” The “adult” picture is a modern take on cinema, but it requires the sophistication acquired through age and experience to be appreciated.

An emphasis on novelty seems to be a good part of what critics (and presumably audiences) are seeking. The novelty, however, does not come in the form of spectacle or the technical innovations at which Hollywood excelled. Rather, the novelty is of seeing qualities different from those with which Hollywood had been heavily identified and which such audiences had seen many times over in years of regular attendance. Mae Tinee even points out in her *Hajji Baba* review that, despite the film’s young stars and

⁹³ Mae Tinee. “Film Rating: Adults, Dull, Teens, Fine!” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 3, 1954, A8.

lavish cinemascope presentation, it was the kind of film that “might have been made 20 years ago.”⁹⁴ In the review quoted above, Crowther discusses two films that he sees as part of Hollywood’s attempts to capture the attentions of the adult audience by simply featuring stories about middle-aged characters but which fail in this endeavor by presenting the stories in a juvenile Hollywood-esque fashion. “Certainly,” Crowther writes, “the over-30 audience is entitled to more respect for its experience and its intelligence...”⁹⁵ Such a complaint harkens back to the social historians’ arguments that a large part of the social devaluation of elders in the twentieth century came about through the country’s rapid mechanization and industrialization which made flexibility and adaptability more useful qualities than experience. Experience is increasingly devalued by those in power, be they employers of the American public or the producers of cinematic product.

If Hollywood studios were only occasionally managing to release a suitably adult film, such as *The Lost Weekend* (Billy Wilder, 1945), according to Seldes, or *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), according to Crowther, what other films are providing a model for these critics? One of the recurring points of reference is European cinema, specifically releases from France and Great Britain. A quote from a 1947 article headlined “Marlene Dietrich Thinks British Films More Adult” seems to sum up a particular view looking outward to foreign releases. The article quotes Dietrich: “It must be remembered that 75 per cent of American audiences are children and so films have to be made to suit their standards. American children just live for movies but here in Europe

⁹⁴ Tinee, “Film Rating...”, A8,

⁹⁵ Crowther, “For the Over-30s...”, 81.

they don't see them so often, so all your big films are more for adults."⁹⁶ Aside from the somewhat questionable assertion that three-fourths of American audiences are children, which is contradicted by numerous sources, the article conjures an image of Dietrich, an actress of decidedly adult sophistication, abandoning America in favor of Britain because there are no adult films to be found in Hollywood. For the discriminating audiences described by the critics, movie attendance is following in much the same pattern. Mae Tinee states quite plainly "Adults who like adult entertainment have been patronizing intelligent foreign films."⁹⁷ Her previously quoted review for *14 Hours* also praises the film's adult qualities in part by likening it to European cinema. She writes, "Here is an adult picture made for adults [...] Here is realism of the sort which made American audiences react to imported films."⁹⁸ Crowther, in a review of a 1948 French import, adds to a definition of the adult qualities associated with European film, "One might naturally expect something classy from the French film 'The Room Upstairs,' something adult and fascinating, perhaps thoughtful, perhaps spiced with wit..."⁹⁹

Such comparisons are not limited to critics, either. A letter to the screen editor of the *New York Times*, helpfully titled by the *Times* as 'Comment from the Midwest,' describes the superiority of British films: "The English films, their actors, their photography, their productions, are of another world [than Hollywood]. They are in a

⁹⁶ "Marlene Dietrich Thinks British Films More Adult," *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 1947, 5.

⁹⁷ Mae Tinee. "Film Hits Hard in Striking at Race Prejudice," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 26, 1949, A7.

⁹⁸ Tinee, "20th Produces": B4.

⁹⁹ Bosley Crowther. "Marlene Dietrich and Jean Gabin in 'The Room Upstairs,'" *The New York Times*, September 4, 1948, 8.

keenly observant, thoughtful, and mature world, not necessarily too English or un-American, but one that deals with human beings on the screen as human, for entertainment of other human human [sic] beings.”¹⁰⁰ The underlying fear that aging in modern American society robs one of his or her individual and “human” status is recognizable in this letter. Geoffrey Wagner’s article about the lost audience even prescribes a look to European cinema to cure Hollywood’s problems with retaining adult audience members, particularly the British films overseen by international producer Filippo del Giudice, including *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944), *Blithe Spirit* (David Lean, 1945), and *The Way to the Stars* (Anthony Asquith, 1945). “The film industry in England today,” Wagner writes, “is not living off the ‘habit’ film, the so-called ‘safe’ Sidney Box picture at all; it survives—what is left of it—on the earnings of adult films made either by del Giudice or his followers.”¹⁰¹

Interest in such films was strong on both sides of the pond. In an article titled “The Critics Vote: New York Film Scribes Warmly Favor British Accomplishments in 1946,” Crowther describes the broad acclaim for British pictures in the annual gathering of New York film critics, which led to the del Giudice-produced *Henry V* (Laurence Olivier, 1944) just barely losing top honors to *The Best Years of Our Lives*.¹⁰² He also notes that, in an unusual move, the London film critics, in the announcement of their own annual awards, also heavily favored films from Britain and France over Hollywood’s

¹⁰⁰ Richard Ranseen. “The Readers Write: Comment from the Midwest About ‘Brief Encounter’ Protests Bad Films,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1947.

¹⁰¹ Wagner (1952), 342-343.

¹⁰² Bosley Crowther. “The Critics Vote: New York Film Scribes Warmly Favor British Accomplishments in 1946,” *New York Times*, January 5, 1947, X1.

releases. He includes the following prognostication: “Films now coming from Europe have such quality and class as to render them serious competition to the products of Hollywood—on the artistic level, at the moment, but in popular regard tomorrow.”¹⁰³ It is the kind of warning that would be felt more keenly by the industry as the 1940s wore on.

The growing interest in European films as a novel and attractive cinema for adults in comparison to Hollywood may be viewed as symptomatic of its time after 1948. Following the de-monopolization of film exhibition and distribution enforced upon the Hollywood studios by the Paramount Decree, American theaters were opened up more than ever to films, many of them European, distributed independently of the powerful Hollywood studios, though their distribution was limited to the rapidly expanding art house circuit. Additionally, many major studios also began to import foreign films and exhibit them in the US theaters they still controlled, due to reciprocal agreements with European countries.¹⁰⁴ With greater exposure to foreign cinemas and the beginnings of European realist movements on display in these films—many created in explicit opposition to Hollywood norms—it is not surprising that those invested in film as an art form would take note and would perhaps look to such films as a possible model of a new approach for an ailing industry. This also, however, points to broader cultural anxieties about the place of the United States as the new world leader following the end of World War II, as can also be inferred by Crowther’s warning to the American industry. This idea is bolstered by the fact that many of these calls for Hollywood to take on the adult

¹⁰³ Crowther, “The Critics Vote...”: X1.

¹⁰⁴ Gomery (1992), 182.

approaches of European cinema do so in part by appealing to American nationalistic feelings. Wagner advocates the approach taken by independent international producers like del Giudice, likening it to the individualism that speaks to Americans: “The lifeblood of American culture springs from the genius and spontaneity of individual effort...”¹⁰⁵ Such a statement does, of course, also ask for Hollywood to completely upend the foundations of its central studio system. Asking for less a systemic overhaul of production methods than a change in content, J.A. Rogers’s essay about Hollywood films’ inferiority to European pictures even spreads the acclaim to Russian film in a final note, appealing to his readers’ national pride: “Why should Russians who have so much less education and money than Americans have such finer pictures?”¹⁰⁶

Indeed, this discourse seems to suggest that, if Americans are to accept their country’s newfound role as the dominant world power, dignity in this responsibility must be promoted. It seems noteworthy that the cinema most often looked to in these discussions as the “adult” cinema in contrast to a “juvenile cinema” is that of Great Britain, the former world power from whom America had just inherited the title. There is a desire in this discourse to legitimize this American art form and, by extension, its people. The national cinemas of other countries should not be allowed to grow more sophisticated while Hollywood is left appearing primitive and immature with, in Crowther’s words, its “big, booming, Cinemascope broadsides that make loud noises and

¹⁰⁵ Wagner (1952), 350.

¹⁰⁶ Rogers “Made-in-America Movies”, 6.

blast thin air.”¹⁰⁷ Seldes’s fears speak directly to this notion and the stakes involved beyond art. He warns of the consequences of a juvenile cinema, writing “It will presently appear that so long as the movies neglect the majority of citizens they must actually contribute to the creation of a robotized society...”¹⁰⁸ This ‘robotized society,’ with dehumanized implications threatens more than just culture, however. It is of national importance. Seldes writes: “There is no vested interest in maturity, although the maturity of its citizens is the prime interest of the nation. ‘Preach, dear sir,’ wrote Jefferson, ‘a crusade against ignorance.’ And, he might now add, against immaturity.”¹⁰⁹ This discourse locates those qualities associated with the idea of the “adult”—intelligence, responsibility, sophistication and lack of interest in fantasy—in a particular moment of postwar reality and illuminates some of the concerns brought with it.

Competing for the Adult Market

In a discursive formation, not only must a phenomenon be present to be talked about, but talking about this phenomenon, in many ways, makes the phenomenon more visible. Hollywood was certainly not unaware of the discourse surrounding adult films and the general distaste of older audiences toward its products. Susan Ohmer’s *George Gallup in Hollywood* illustrates the powerful role that polling and audience preference surveys, particularly those performed by George Gallup and the Audience Research

¹⁰⁷ Bosley Crowther. “In Small Packages: Noting That Interesting Motion Pictures Need Not Come on Wide Screens,” *The New York Times*, April 11, 1954, X1.

¹⁰⁸ Seldes (1951), 14.

¹⁰⁹ Seldes (1951), 249.

Institute began to occupy in 1940s Hollywood.¹¹⁰ Much of the research Ohmer details is referenced in the contemporary works by Handel, Seldes and Wagner, indicating a certain pool of shared information both within and outside of the industry. As Ohmer illustrates, such information was interpreted in a number of different ways to serve various purposes and interests, but, as the reality of the lost audience became increasingly clear, certainly the information contained in such studies grew more significant and difficult to deny. It is also likely that the film industry did more than simply read the same research accessed by these critics—some within the industry likely also read the criticism itself. Crowther and his fellow critics may not have held sway over the industry and the culture to the extent they may have preferred or imagined, but they certainly expressed their ideas on a large public platform that would not have gone unnoticed. Handel’s book, however, represents a more concrete example of this critical discourse receiving industry attention. In addition to its content revolving in large part around the same surveys examined in the industry, Handel acknowledges assistance from, among others, Howard Dietz, vice-president of MGM, Jay A. Grove, a former head of sales development for MGM, and another MGM employee, Thomas W. Gerety, whose position is unspecified. The release of Handel’s book—despite its status as a work of social science put out by an academic press for a presumably scholarly community—is even noteworthy enough to merit a small article in an industry journal, *The Hollywood Reporter*.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Susan Ohmer. *George Gallup in Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

¹¹¹ “Audience Research Book is Published,” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 8, 1950, 8.

In looking at the subject matter of several “adult” pictures released by the studios during this time period, as well as examining the ways in which Hollywood experimented with promoting and exhibiting such films, it becomes clear that a potential audience market had been recognized and was, for a brief time, courted. Among the “adult” pictures released by the studios during this period, there are several that deal directly in their texts with the difficulties of aging in contemporary society as well as growing generational divides and conflict, such as *The Mating Season*, *My Son John*, *Forever Female*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *All About Eve*.

In *The Mating Season* (Mitchell Leisen, 1951), Thelma Ritter stars as Ellen McNulty, the widowed mother of a successful man who has newly wed a high society girl. Ellen, the proprietor of a failing restaurant, receives word of the wedding just as her attempts to keep the business afloat have come to an unsuccessful end. Using the last of her savings, she plans a surprise visit to the newlyweds as a distraction while she figures out how she will now support herself and where she will live. Her daughter-in-law, Maggie (Gene Tierney), mistakes Ellen, aged and unfashionably clothed, as a housekeeper sent over by an agency. Not wishing to embarrass her daughter-in-law nor reveal the working class background from which the new husband hails, Ellen takes on the role of the housekeeper (as well as the accompanying wages and boarding room), convincing her reluctant son to help keep up the ruse. Hijinks ensue until eventually all is revealed and the newlyweds welcome Ellen to move in permanently as a member of the household. Aside from the main points of the plot, Ellen’s concerns about being a burden to her son and desire to make herself of use while taking up residence in his home speak

to the uneasy social place of the elder in a modern, nuclear set-up. Her skeptical reaction to the materialism of her son's life also adds to the generational conflict and tension of the broader story. While the story of the elder out of place in the home of the younger generation is not so far removed from a film like *Make Way for Tomorrow*, it is given a new spin in the later context of *The Mating Season*. Ellen does have means to be independent of her son—she has run her own business, she proves competent and willing as a professional-quality housekeeper—but she chooses to live with him and his wife and this is presented as a novel and unusual situation. The burden of dependency does not create dramatic tension—rather, class and generational difference turn the engine of the plot.

In the notorious drama *My Son John* (1952), director Leo McCarey harkens back to his work on *Make Way for Tomorrow* in his sympathetic portrayal of two aging parents who come to recognize that their adult son is a fervent member of the Communist Party. Although dealing with the hot contemporary topic of the communist threat and the fear that they “walk among us,” the majority of the film concentrates on the drama of the parents, Lucille (Helen Hayes) and Dan (Dean Jagger), in coping with the cultural gap that has opened between them and their son John (Robert Walker). John, who “has more degrees than a thermometer,” returns to visit his parents after a very long time away. They are off-put and hurt by the attitude he brings back with him, one of scorn for his parents' old-fashioned patriotism and devotion to their church. He is condescending and treats his parents—otherwise upstanding and respected citizens in their community, active members of the church and American Legion—like children. Toward the end of

the film, when Lucille sides with her conscience and country and tries to give her son up to the FBI, he claims that she is a mentally unstable old woman and attempts to have her institutionalized to protect himself. The film ends on an unsettling note, the parents are devastated by what has become of the child they raised and John, momentarily reconsidering his choices after finally listening to his mother, is murdered by a fellow Communist Party member. McCarey's film is notably alarmist, not only in its portrayal of the Communist threat, but also in its conflation of that threat (and its attendant characteristics of callousness, icy intellectualism, selfishness, and inhumanity) with the younger generation currently ascending to social dominance.

In *Forever Female* (Irving Rapper, 1953), following the pattern laid out by *All About Eve* and *Sunset Boulevard* discussed below, down to the casting of William Holden opposite the older woman, Ginger Rogers stars as an aging Broadway star, Beatrice Page, desperately still trying to play "twenty-nine." The film revolves around Beatrice who, since divorcing her age-appropriate producer Harry (Paul Douglas), has continued to star in his plays and remain friends with him while dating a series of much younger men. Stanley (William Holden), an up-and-coming playwright, befriends Beatrice and Harry, who agrees to produce Stanley's first play, a drama about an adult woman struggling to break away from her powerful mother, provided that Beatrice play the daughter. Stanley reluctantly agrees and during the pre-production process embarks on an affair with Beatrice. Meanwhile, a comedic sequence of aged actresses brought out of the mothballs to audition for the mother role commences, and Stanley meets a young aspiring actress, Sally (Pat Crowley), who attempts to romance him and convince him

that the role of the daughter only works if played by an age-appropriate actress. The play eventually opens with Beatrice in the role of the daughter, to little success.

Though Harry warns Beatrice that her relationship with Stanley is a joke, stating that “You’ve played comedy enough to know when a thing is funny,” she accepts Stanley’s proposal of marriage. Before they can wed, though, Beatrice leaves Stanley to embark on her yearly solo trip abroad. While she is away, Stanley begins to second-guess their relationship and one night Harry takes him on a trip to a secluded cabin in upstate New York. There they find Beatrice with graying, un touched-up hair, no make-up and frumpy clothing taking part in such un-glamorous activities as sculpting pottery and rocking on the porch. Resigned to the fact that Harry has revealed her secret yearly get-away, she explains to Stanley that this is the only place where “for two months a year, I can be my age.” When Stanley asks why she can’t be her age all year, she explains:

You ask an actress to give up being twenty-nine? When you’re an older and wiser playwright, Stanley, and you write a part for a woman of thirty-four or thirty-five or even forty, you’ll find that the actress will come to you and say ‘Why does she have to be thirty-four or thirty-five or even forty? Why can’t she be twenty-nine?’ It’s such a wonderful age. Can you blame us for lingering and lingering and lingering? And then finally having to be dragged through...and it isn’t only in the theater—look at the audience sometime, it’s full of twenty-nines.

After this realization of Beatrice’s true age and feelings, Stanley agrees that breaking off their engagement is for the best. They decide to continue with the play only with Beatrice in the role of the mother and Sally as the ingénue and do so to great acclaim. The film ends with proper generational order restored with Stanley paired up with Sally and Beatrice back together again with the age-appropriate Harry.

The story of the aging woman negotiating her changing social position is a key plot in a number of high-profile adult melodramas during the mid-1950s, such as *All That Heaven Allows* (Douglas Sirk, 1955) and *Autumn Leaves* (Robert Aldrich, 1956), which I discuss in-depth from a generic perspective in Chapter 4. The positioning of Beatrice in *Forever Female* as the aging diva unwilling to cede the stage to the younger generation, is of particular interest, though, as it is of a piece with a number of films during the early 1950s that focus on a plot in which an aging female star confronts her own social and professional irrelevance. In *Forever Female*, Beatrice eventually comes to accept this fact with a modicum of grace. In two much better known pictures of this period, though, *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950), this negotiation of generational dominance and shifting social place is much more fraught.

Released almost back-to-back in 1950, *Sunset Boulevard* and *All About Eve* seem almost to be speaking directly to this generational conflict between Hollywood and its aging audience members and serve as interesting case studies when looking to industry attempts to recapture this particular part of the lost audience. On the surface, both films have some remarkable similarities. Each features as its central character an aging actress involved with more youthful men and struggling with either having become or being in the process of becoming irrelevant to the worlds in which they formerly reigned.

In *Sunset Boulevard*, Gloria Swanson plays Norma Desmond, a former silent film star who has been almost wholly isolated in her Hollywood mansion since the coming of sound pictures and begins a delusional attempt at a comeback. This comeback is

facilitated when Norma meets up with a down-on-his-luck young screenwriter, Joe Gillis (William Holden). Norma hires Joe to edit a screenplay retelling the story of Salome, which Norma plans to have Cecil B. DeMille direct, starring herself. Within *Sunset Boulevard*, the generational, as well as gendered, power dynamics of the period are reversed; Norma is presented as holding an incredible amount of power over Joe. She pays off his debt collectors, provides him a room in her mansion, and gives him a salary (far higher than he had been making as a struggling screenwriter) to edit her pet project. This reversal of power, with Joe financially dependent on Norma, is the opposite of the set-up in a film like *The Mating Season*. Joe is not only emasculated by his lack of power in their relationship but also displaced as a young, able-bodied working man, dependent for income and support on an aged woman. Such a reversal, underscored by Norma's romantic advances toward Joe, is presented as perverse. Joe is openly uncomfortable with the situation, voicing his disgust with himself and repulsion directed toward this older woman in power; Norma is presented as an unnatural, ghoulish femme fatale.

Norma's unusually powerful situation is also steadily undercut throughout the film. The fan letters she receives daily are revealed to be written by her devoted manservant/ex-husband (Eric von Stroheim), supporting her fantasy of social relevance rather than have her face the truth that she is no longer a person of consequence in contemporary society. Her beauty routine is presented as a horror show involving peculiar and painful rituals and devices, requiring herculean efforts to maintain her face and physique. She is not allowed the dignity of upholding any mystery in her beauty routine. Her power as an experienced star actress and a wealthy woman are also

undermined by her frequent bouts of theatrical melancholy and failed suicide attempts, revealing a desperate need for attention and overwhelming insecurity. Norma's only regular company beyond her manservant, are "the waxworks," a trio of fellow Hollywood has-beens (including Buster Keaton, Anna Q. Nilsson, and H.B. Warner) who meet occasionally to play cards, and a pet monkey who, at the start of the film, has died, leaving her devastated. Norma's monkey and waxwork friends aren't the only things presented as immobile and isolated from the contemporary moment—the opulent furnishings of Norma's mansion are frozen in the era of the roaring twenties, her acting style is consistently implied to be passé, even the titular street on which the action of the film takes place has implications of death and stars gone dark.

Norma's choice to cast herself in the role of Salome for her comeback is also a plot element designed to emphasize Norma's delusion, as Salome is known as a seductive but foolish young woman. It is also a symbolic choice—Salome orders the head of John the Baptist brought to her on a platter as an act of revenge toward him; in *Sunset Boulevard*, Joe ends up dead through an act of revenge on Norma's part. When Joe announces at last that he is going to desert Norma, leaving her in a position of no power over anyone, she shoots him in the back in a fit of rage. After murdering Joe, Norma is tricked into bringing herself downstairs to the police (to presumably be arrested and institutionalized) by being told that Cecil B. DeMille and her adoring public are waiting for her to come out and perform her Salome. Driven by her desire for the attention and importance, Norma makes her famous staircase descent, informing DeMille that she is ready for her close-up.

All About Eve is also a film about one generation usurping the social power of the previous generation, though its protagonist, Margo (Bette Davis), is not delusional about this or even in denial, as Norma was. In contrast, Margo is all too aware of this inevitability, her bitterness about its approach marking her within the film as an ill-tempered diva. Like *Sunset Boulevard*, *All About Eve* opens near the end of the story, then backtracks to demonstrate how things got to this point. We are introduced to Margo, a Broadway star all too aware of her increasing age and the approaching loss of favor in the eyes of the public and casting directors. Margo is at the peak of her power, commanding star roles, and dating a handsome younger director. In a moment of pity, she invites a down-on-her-luck, worshipful fan Eve (Anne Baxter), to work as Margo's assistant, despite the fact that Margo's maid and aged confidant, Birdie (Thelma Ritter), does not trust the young woman. Over the course of the following year, Eve turns out not to be as innocent as originally believed; rather, she is cunning and deceitful, playing the part of endearing ingénue while gradually undermining Margo, scheming to use the older star as a means to her own Broadway success.

As Margo becomes aware of Eve's ulterior motives and true nature, she struggles to reassert her own authority, but is chastised by those close to her in her personal and professional life who believe the aging actress is merely acting out of insecurity, paranoia, and jealousy. The ageist (and sexist) character of this treatment of Margo by those who supposedly know her best reaches its highest articulation when Margo's younger director lover breaks off their relationship, only to find himself seduced by Eve, who is poised to become the new darling of Broadway. Margo has been, both personally

and professionally, replaced by a younger model. Although Margo and her lover do reconcile and decide to marry, Margo's career stagnates. She continues performing in the same show while Eve schemes her way into roles originally intended for Margo, and they serve as the launch pad to her ascension as Broadway's new star. Though the film ends with no redemption for Margo's career, many of her friends and colleagues do return to her side, realizing her wisdom. In a cynical twist in the final moments of the film, though, Margo is provided with some element of karmic justice as Eve befriends a younger worshipful fan who rapidly insinuates herself into Eve's life as an assistant of sorts. The fan/assistant is shown helping an exhausted Eve to bed and then secretly trying on Eve's award show gown, implying another inevitable generational coup.

Both *All About Eve* and *Sunset Boulevard* revolve around matters uniquely relevant to adult audience members—these are not the problems or difficulties of youth—but also uniquely of interest in the context of Hollywood's supposed catering to an increasingly juvenile audience. Here, the indignity of aging in a modern world where there is always more vivacious youth ready to replace the world's former stars satirizes not only aging in modern society, but also in Hollywood. The films present a portrait of Hollywood's treatment of aging both on and off-screen. It seems strangely appropriate that, in the race for the Best Actress Oscar that year Swanson and Davis were singled out as the two favorites for the prize. There was much coverage and media speculation over which grand dame would take the trophy, only to have both beat out by 29-year-old Judy Holliday.

The presence of these experienced actresses, along with other older stars, like von Stroheim and Keaton, may have also appealed to an older audience who had grown up with such stars and possibly felt more of a connection to them than younger, contemporary stars. Additionally, there may have been a revival of interest of sorts in stars of Hollywood's earlier eras. As Douglas Gomery has found, beginning in the late 1940s and carrying on into the 1950s, pre-1948 titles (those free from residuals pay) were sold to television and subsequently aired frequently to fill blocks of time.¹¹² Additionally, as Christine Becker's work details, the early years of television regularly featured older Hollywood stars in new programming.¹¹³ As many contemporary stars with active studio contracts were forbidden to appear on television until the mid-1950s, these older stars brought a level of prestige to the fledgling industry that in return offered them roles and exposure they were unable to obtain elsewhere. Davis was still a viable and prolific actress, but had been, at that point, a Hollywood star since the mid-1930s and was certainly past the peak of marquee stardom. Like her film character, Gloria Swanson's heyday had ended with the coming of sound, though she had appeared sporadically on film into the early 1940s. Notably, she was also the host of an early television show, *The Gloria Swanson Hour*, the same year that her *Sunset Boulevard* co-star Buster Keaton also began hosting his own weekly television program. Such stars may have been viewed by the studios as welcome bait to the desired adult audience, promising not only the novelty of older stars on screen but also producing pleasure in nostalgia, harkening back

¹¹² Gomery (1992), 248.

¹¹³ Christine Becker. *It's The Pictures That Got Small: Hollywood Film Stars on 1950s Television* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).

to earlier eras when both the stars and their fans were at the peak of their social relevance. This particular topic will be explored further in the following chapter.

The print advertising campaigns for both pictures fit clearly with this narrative of selling “adult” film. While print ads that appeared nationwide for *All About Eve* are fairly unremarkable, using pull-quotes from critics and centering on Davis’s still-bankable stardom, they market the film based on prestige and implied sophistication, particularly in those that ran toward the end of 1950, touting the film as a serious Oscar contender.¹¹⁴ The film was also marketed to exhibitors and industry members in this fashion more explicitly, with one ten-page spread in *The Hollywood Reporter* on October 18, 1950, advertising the film through full-page reprints of its critical reviews, as a notable example.¹¹⁵ That critics loved the film meant that it should satisfy the adult public craving for more challenging, intelligent fare.

The advertising for *Sunset Boulevard* takes a different approach, emphasizing the youth/age divide in the film. Ads that ran in multiple papers throughout September of 1950 feature a knotted filmstrip dividing the ad space diagonally. On one side is an image of Swanson looking enraged and imposing; on the other side is an image of Holden and age-appropriate love-interest Nancy Olson embracing—explicitly drawing a line between old and young.¹¹⁶ Other variations of this ad include text that reads: “*Sunset Boulevard* is the story of young Joe Gillis, a Hollywood writer. It is also the story of Norma Desmond,

¹¹⁴ An example of this type of ad for *All About Eve* can be viewed in *The Washington Post*, November 2, 1950, 17.

¹¹⁵ *The Hollywood Reporter*, October 18, 1950, 8-18.

¹¹⁶ An example of this type of ad for *Sunset Boulevard* can be viewed in the *Portland Press Herald*, September 7, 1950, 21.

a glamorous movie star...and of young Betty Schaefer who loved Joe with all her heart.”¹¹⁷ Another variation, which dropped the signature knotted film strip motif instead places images of Swanson, Holden, and Olson in a diagonal line (Swanson at the top, Olson at the bottom, Holden in the middle) with text that reads: “When a woman as experienced and rich as Norma Desmond gets her clutches on a man as heedless as young Joe Gillis...nothing can save him but a lovely girl like Betty Schaefer.”¹¹⁸ The contrast between generation is underscored more visually in trade ads for the film’s premiere, which feature the images of Swanson, Holden, and Olson separated by the knotted film strip, but in this instance the images are placed inside the drawing of an hourglass, with Swanson (and her association with the ravages of time) bearing down on Holden and Olson.¹¹⁹ Considering that Olson’s role is actually fairly small within the film’s plot, the consistent inclusion of her in the ads, as well as the emphasis on conflict between the younger couple and Swanson as well as the employment of descriptive terms like “young,” “experienced,” and “girl,” means that age and generational divide appear to be a key selling point. The idea of Swanson as a deranged figure of menace, keeping the young and naïve Holden in her “clutches” and apart from good “girl” Olson is somewhat different than the reality of the film’s content, where Olson is a street-smart Hollywood screenwriter and a fairly minor character and Holden is sarcastic and grim, using

¹¹⁷ An example of this type of ad for *Sunset Boulevard* can be viewed in *The Washington Post*, September 7, 1950, 15.

¹¹⁸ An example of this type of ad for *Sunset Boulevard* can be viewed in *The Trenton Evening Times*, September 27, 1950, 30.

¹¹⁹ For an example of this type of ad for *Sunset Boulevard*, see *Motion Picture Herald*, August 1, 1950, 412.

Swanson for her money. In these ads, age and generational conflict are stirred up and inflated for the purpose of selling the film.

The directors of these films were also been promoted in advertising in a fashion apparently meant to attract the sophistication-starved adult audience. Both are prominently mentioned in advertising for the films, along with their previous adult-friendly films, such as Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945), a gritty portrait of a middle-aged man's descent into alcoholism, and Mankiewicz's *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), a complicated drama about infidelity among three married couples. Both had won Academy Awards for these efforts and this sort of prestige is emphasized over their previous efforts in romantic comedies or crime pictures. Wilder in particular is promoted in line with the discourse about adult films, although his European background (German rather than the preferred British or French) is downplayed. An ad for Wilder's follow-up to *Sunset Boulevard*, the newspaper drama *Ace in the Hole* (1951) during its production period even builds up anticipation for the film in part by playing up its "adult" appeal. In a "personal testimony" by star Kirk Douglas, the copy reads, in part, "I think American audiences are adult enough to appreciate the impact of the frank, hard-hitting picture, especially as brought to the screen by Billy Wilder, whose equally powerful pictures 'The Lost Weekend' and 'Sunset Boulevard' were universally acclaimed."¹²⁰ *The Lost Weekend* had been one of the few Hollywood films included in Seldes's examination of films that come close to having the qualities for which he was arguing. Wilder also seems to be promoted at this time as a figure not unlike European directors and producers

¹²⁰ *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 1951, D3.

associated with “adult” films, like del Giudice, Jean Renoir, or Otto Preminger, as is Mankiewicz, whose previous work as a producer of many prestigious pictures is often mentioned. In a two-page profile and interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Wilder is quoted as stating “Class in pictures nowadays has to be smuggled in like contraband, and artistry is a nasty word.”¹²¹ Wilder’s pictures, of course, the interview leads the reader to believe, change this.

A look at the exhibition of *Sunset Boulevard* and *All About Eve* also reveals experimentation perhaps intended to attract a different audience. As Handel surmised in 1950, “Movie-going is essentially a social activity, and young people are more likely to band together for the purpose of entertainment. Then, for movies one has to leave the house, which probably becomes more distasteful as one grows older.”¹²² The early exhibition strategies of *Sunset Boulevard* and *All About Eve* may be viewed as possible attempts to draw those older people from their homes for the purpose of seeing adult films, to make the experience more appealing and less “distasteful.” One way to make such an excursion worthwhile, of course, is to make the film screening appear as an event, by building a sense of exclusiveness around it. Prior to its official New York premiere in August of 1951, *Sunset Boulevard* had 21 separate private pseudo-premieres.¹²³ Over the course of seven months a waiting list of interested “important names” was kept by Paramount’s publicity department and when this list reached around

¹²¹ Philip K Scheuer. “Wilder Seeks Films ‘With Bite’ to Satisfy ‘Nation of Hecklers.’” *Los Angeles Times*, August 20, 1950, D1.

¹²² Handel (1951), 103.

¹²³ “Seven-Month Campaign Builds High Interest in ‘Sunset Blvd.’” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 8, 1950, 8.

75 names, a screening was held, complete with director, screenwriter, producers and stars in attendance. During the last three months before the premiere, Gloria Swanson was dispatched around the country for a “three month exploitation tour” in pre-release promotion for the film.¹²⁴ Following the actual premiere, the film was then trucked around the country for a series of 15 engagements in cities like Des Moines, Buffalo, Jacksonville and Indianapolis before opening its proper first-run release.¹²⁵

In the early exhibition of *All About Eve*, we see a different attempt to draw attention to the experience of attending the film. In August of 1950, 20th Century Fox announced plans to enforce a “scheduled performances” policy where tickets for all screenings of *All About Eve* at every theater that booked the film must be purchased in advance and no one would be allowed to enter the auditorium after the screening had begun.¹²⁶ Additionally, the film would only be screened as a single bill. According to Fox, “The average larger theatre would have tickets on advance sales at the box office, at ticket offices, drug stores, etc. The tickets would have a different color for each show and would have the date and starting time of the performance printed on them.”¹²⁷ The plan, which received quite a bit of coverage, was justified on the basis of allowing screenwriters to be “freed of many restrictions,” clearly attempting to emphasize the value of the film as an art form rather than a commercial product.¹²⁸ This was tied to the

¹²⁴ “Swanson to Canada.” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 7, 1950, 5.

¹²⁵ “15 Key City Dates Set for ‘Sunset Blvd.’” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 7, 1950, 5.

¹²⁶ “Fox President Announces Plan to Bar Patrons After Start of Film.” *Hollywood Reporter*, August 12, 1950, 21.

¹²⁷ “Fox President Announces...” *Hollywood Reporter*, 21.

¹²⁸ William R Weaver. “Hollywood Roots for ‘Scheduled Showings.’” *Motion Picture Herald*, September 16, 1950, 33.

quality of *All About Eve* itself as well. A Fox promotion reads: “When we first saw ‘All About Eve,’ [...] we became aware that its utter fascination and charm were immeasurably due to the fact that we were seeing it the only way it should be seen—from the beginning.”¹²⁹ Despite the publicity, however, by the end of the film’s premiere run at the Roxy in New York City, it was announced that the remainder of *All About Eve*’s run would follow normal exhibition practices. The “scheduled performances” practice was deemed unsuccessful: “confusion arose because of the public’s deeply ingrained habit of going to a movie at any desired hour, when most convenient or on impulse.”¹³⁰ That this practice of “scheduled performances” ultimately attempted to turn the film-going experience into something resembling a night out at the legitimate theater, an activity presumed to be frequented by those who, to use Crowther’s description had “money, maturity, and minds” seems wholly intentional. Such practices as those applied to *Sunset Boulevard* and *All About Eve* work to differentiate these films from other Hollywood output, as well as to differentiate the film-going experience from that associated with youth audiences at drive-ins (an increasingly popular venue) and local theaters.

These films and the various strategies employed to promote and exhibit them can be viewed as a kind of “adultsploitation.” During the same era in which many filmmakers attempted to lure audiences in by exploiting the idea of “youth” in the form of cinematic juvenile delinquents, bobby soxers, and, eventually, wayward teens and rock and rollers,

¹²⁹ *Motion Picture Herald*, September 30, 1950, 5.

¹³⁰ “‘Eve’ Is Going On Continuous Basis; Roxy Switches Fri,” *Hollywood Reporter*, October 18, 1950, 1.

in an attempt to capture a youth demographic, so too did Hollywood experiment with exploiting the idea of the “adult,” as a subject matter and an experience. This notion of “adultsploitation” is revisited in a more garish, “agesploitation” form in the psycho biddy pictures and early elder kitsch roles that I discuss in Chapter 4. The idea of “adultsploitation,” and its 1950s context, though, is important in understanding the role such films played in the battles over censorship during this period, ultimately affecting the allowable content of Hollywood films in years to come.

Adult Pictures and Censorship

There is a second thread in the discourse around adult films in this period that is crucial to take note of: the relationship between audiences and censorship. While this relationship is included in Seldes’ arguments and, to a lesser extent, Wagner’s, none of the critics mentioned pursued this topic more so than Bosley Crowther. Crowther was a vocal opponent of film censorship, specifically the Hayes Code, from the 1940s onward. He wrote frequently on the topic and periodically appeared in public forums to argue his views. In a 1951 forum, Crowther stated that motion picture industry now held a place of “comparative innocuousness” due to the fact that it has “warped into the patterns of standardization for convenience of merchandising—and because it has largely acceded to the pressures of the protesting elements.”¹³¹ Crowther advised that, unless the industry moved past “censor-phobia” toward a “more mature approach,” it would continue to suffer audience loss.¹³²

¹³¹ Crowther, “TV and Radio...” 36.

¹³² Crowther, “TV and Radio...” 36.

Crowther argued this point through numerous reviews and essays for several years. A 1957 piece on the subject, entitled “All for the Kids: Viewing an Anomaly of Censorship” resulted in a page of letters to the editor the following week.¹³³ In these letters, readers from around the country variously agree or disagree with Crowther’s anti-censorship stance and reveal that such debates are as much about adults and “adult” films as about the protection of children. Frederick Ordway, a letter-writer from Huntsville, Alabama, expresses a view that most closely resembles the arguments made by those like Crowther and Seldes. He writes, “Why the American adult, protected individual that he is, cannot see what adults in France, Italy, Mexico or Sweden see is a question I am certain many readers have asked.”¹³⁴ Ordway’s statements again emphasize anxieties about America’s stance in relation to other nations and points to a self-imposed immaturity that insists the American adult be “protected.”

Another reader argues a very different point of view that, notably, in a debate about censorship, has nothing to do with the protection of children. Linda Givney, of Troy, New York, writes:

He [Crowther] speaks of censorship as a roadblock that had obstructed artistic progress for years. But how many of these kinds of movies have ever won an Academy Award ‘Oscar’ or even come close to being a work of art? Anyone who has seen pictures such as ‘War and Peace’ or ‘Marty’ knows that a true work of art does not have to be objectionable. [...] Bad movies can have bad effects on adults too and lead to crimes and sin by older people as well as the young. [...] He speaks also of objectionable movies giving adults entertainment and being

¹³³ Bosley Crowther. “All for the Kids: Viewing an Anomaly of Film Censorship,” *The New York Times*, March 3, 1957, 107.

¹³⁴ Frederick I. Ordway. “Readers Views: Problems of Censorship, Theatres Discussed,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 1957, X5.

meaningless of youths but adults have or should have more intelligence than to look for entertainment in these kinds of pictures.¹³⁵

Giveny's letter shows that a change has already begun to occur in the discursive formation of "adult" films from the late 1940s into the mid-1950s. The films she mentions by name, *Marty* (Delbert Mann, 1955) and *War and Peace* (King Vidor, 1956) could in many ways fit into the formation of adult film as it has been described earlier—literate, intelligent, realist or sober. Neither the filmmakers of *Marty* nor *War and Peace* would likely have assumed they were producing these films for a juvenile audience. By 1957, however, such films are being differentiated as intelligent and artful, unlike the "films for adults"—unrestrained by the Code—that Crowther is arguing for. The letters on this page represent a moment of flux in which the discourse around adult films is often contradictory and the discursive formation appears to be in the process of changing.

It seems unlikely to be coincidence that it is also at this time that films labeled "adults only" begin to appear in major cities throughout the US. Along with foreign releases containing brief nudity, there were more mainstream pictures included under this label as well, such as those made by Otto Preminger. Beginning with *The Moon is Blue* (1953), Preminger, operating as an independent producer and distributing through United Artists, released a string of films which dealt with taboo subject matter—such as rape or drug use—that did extremely well both critically and financially, despite vocal opposition. *The Moon is Blue* was protested by the Catholic Legion of Decency and

¹³⁵ Linda Giveny. "Readers Views: Problems of Censorship, Theatres Discussed," *The New York Times*, March 17, 1957, X5.

ultimately released without the Production Code seal of approval.¹³⁶ To the surprise of many, this did not appear to negatively impact the film's box office take in any significant fashion. The success of Preminger's subsequent film, *The Man With the Golden Arm* (1955), which sought to depict the struggles of a former heroin addict to stay clean and was also released without the Production Code seal, further weakened the power of the Code to "make or break" a film's exhibition and reception. Such high-profile flaunting of disregard for the Code seems to have contributed to a growing sense that such broadly applied censorship was increasing irrelevant and ineffective. For some circles, like that of Crowther and Seldes, this pointed to a need to abolish the Production Code. For others, often local groups, this pointed to a need for the community to take morality enforcement into their own hands. One example involves a police raid in the Jersey City, New Jersey exhibition of *The Moon is Blue* in 1954. An article covering the raid notes that the film is "variously described as sophisticated or immoral" and then details how the police, under pressure from local protest groups, raided the Stanley Theatre (joining "434 adult patrons") but "loath to interrupt the enjoyment of the ticket-holding patrons sat through the picture before enacting to enforce the ban."¹³⁷ Charges against the Stanley's management were later dismissed, and the film continued to be screened.

In another particularly interesting case, the label of "adults only" was written in the city code of Chicago, allowing police to bar anyone under the age of 21 from films

¹³⁶ "Police Raid Halts 'The Moon is Blue' But Jersey City Authorities Sit Through Film Before Enforcing Their Ban," *The New York Times*, January 7, 1954, 26.

¹³⁷ "Police Raid Halts..." *The New York Times*, 26.

the police force—likely under pressure from the city’s powerful Catholic groups—deemed unfit. This decision was brought to national attention when a filmed adaptation of the Eugene O’Neil play *Desire Under the Elms* (Delbert Mann, 1958) was labeled “adults only.” Paramount took the city of Chicago, specifically Mayor Richard J. Daley and police commissioner Timothy J. O’Connor, to court over the label and ban. In March of 1959, Federal District Judge Philip L. Sullivan ruled the ban unconstitutional.¹³⁸ According to the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sullivan ruled that “it is unconstitutional to hold that a picture is ‘obscene’ for one class of persons and not for another. ‘A picture is either obscene (offensive to the taste, foul, loathsome) or it is not. [...] None of these criteria can change with the age of the beholder.’”¹³⁹ In July of 1959, the city enacted a new “adults only” ordinance similar to the previous one with the age cut-off lowered from 21 to 18. The new ordinance was not challenged.¹⁴⁰ The lack of objection to this ban based on the legal age difference between a juvenile and an adult, along with Sullivan’s comments, again illustrate the conflicted discourse about censorship and the definition of “adult” in regard to film exhibition and content at this time. It also points the way toward the development of the age-based rating system that would supersede the Production Code within a decade. Lastly, this illustrates the period in which the discursive formation of “adult film” began to evolve from what it was at the end of the 1940s to what we are familiar with today.

¹³⁸ “Bans ‘Adults Only’ Tag on Films in City: Federal Judge Curbs Police Censors,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 25, 1959, A7.

¹³⁹ “Bans ‘Adults Only’ Tag...” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, A7.

¹⁴⁰ “Act to Revive ‘Adults Only’ Movie Power,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 9, 1959, D11.

Commenting on the Chicago case, as well as similar cases throughout the country, Motion Picture Association of America President Eric Johnston attributed much of the censorship battles to “the more mature types of plots that Hollywood—and foreign companies—have been producing” and noted that this maturity of content was not limited to films but could be seen in recent plays and books as well.¹⁴¹ The interview with Johnston goes on to illustrate the changes that had gone on in just the few short years from the start of the decade to its close: “There was a time, Johnston went on, when people complained because the movies being produced in Hollywood were too juvenile. ‘Now,’ he sighed, ‘some of the people are saying we’re turning out only pictures for adults—nothing for the kids.’”

All of this reveals that, by the beginning of the 1950s, there was a sense on the part of critics and many members of the public that censorship was operating as a kind of juvenilizing force. The Hayes Code in particular, strictly enforced since the early 1930s, censored all Hollywood product into being theoretically acceptable to all audiences, including youth audiences. It is no coincidence that so many of the filmmakers producing “adult” pictures during the early postwar period, like Preminger and del Guidice, were working outside the studio system. The Paramount Decree opened up theaters to films that did not require code approval for exhibition. Although as we have seen, many of these films faced difficulty with local blue laws, their embrace by many critics and audience members significantly weakened the power of the code. As more and more films found exhibition without the code approval and films approved under the code

¹⁴¹ “Film Czar Hits ‘Adult’ Tags as Censorship: Johnston Says More Mature Movies Create Problems, See Policing Woes,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 6, 1959, B1.

guidelines continue to step over those lines in order to compete with more “adult” product, the audience for “adult” pictures largely wins out over broad censorship and local blue laws. The concept of “adult” becomes meaningless in terms of quality, coming to refer instead to films that fall very far from the production code guidelines, including sensual foreign films and, eventually, hardcore pornography. Even before the formal dissolution of the code in the mid-1960s, this reformation of the discourse around the “adult” picture has begun to take place. The idea of making pictures for “adults” and older audiences is, by the end of the 1950s, no longer something to debate or consider—it has, perhaps, served its real purpose as a weapon in the crusade against censorship and an enforced idea of a wholly juvenile audience.

The historical and cultural context that gave rise to a particular type of filmmaking practice that favored a youth audience also gave rise to a discussion about what was not present – films for adults. That discussion, in turn, appears to have had an impact on Hollywood’s output, for this discourse made visible a possible niche market for Hollywood. The responding films and publicity worked in something of a feedback loop to solidify the notion of “adult films” at a particular historical moment. This discursive formation would soon become a lost artifact only fifteen or so years later as a new type of exhibition practice—publicly screened pornographic films—and a shift in cultural context—the social change in the 1960s—as well as changes in censorship practice—the switch from the Code to an age-based rating system—led to a new set of discursive statements that would work to create an entirely new understanding of what “adult films” were.

In the span of only two decades, “adult films” come to mean something entirely different, and that new meaning has had a use-value that has thus far outlasted the former meaning. It is only through analysis of this first meaning, and the historical and cultural specificity that led to that meaning having currency, that we can begin to understand the later shift in the 1960s to a new meaning of “adult films” once the juvenilizing constraints of the studio system and the production code were removed. Additionally, this discursive shift, as well as the marketing and production shifts that move from marking “adult films” as sophisticated material for mature audiences to selling “adults films” as titillating entertainment for the liberated younger generation, reveal an entertainment industry working to adapt to a changing social and cultural environment. In this dynamic environment, generational lines are being strongly demarcated, following the pattern of the twentieth century that will come to a head with the social turmoil of the 1960s and the dominance—socially, culturally, economically, demographically—of the Baby Boomer generation.

The analysis in this chapter reveals an entertainment industry moving away from prewar and wartime strategies of mainstream audience appeal and toward niche demographics, influenced in large part by shifts in the advertising industry, internal research commissions, as well as significant shifts in Americans’ social environments. This discourse suggests that a specific aging public was starting to feel that their entertainment needs were unmet by Hollywood as critics, academics, and people within the industry were warning against the “juvenilization” of American film. All of this coincides with the beginning of the studio system breakdown and the rise of the

independent producer, both of which play a significant role in weakening the production code. This moment speaks to a larger social fracturing along generational lines. The young and the aging no longer are viewed (as well as, seemingly, view themselves) as part of the same mainstream popular culture, but instead ever more apart socially as well as spatially. Eventually the call for “adult” films seems to change meaning: “racy” rather than “sophisticated,” just another way to court the youth market.

In the following chapter, I examine similar occurrences in the realm of early television, which, along with the rise of youthsplotation cinema throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, ultimately funneled many aging stars and elder characters into the role of elder kitsch.

Chapter 3

Blue Hair and the Blue Glow: The Older Star and Early Television

Announcer: "Everybody has fun at the circus."

Keaton: "Except me. I'm tired."

Announcer: "You know what they always say..."

Keaton: "Yeah. The show must go on."

--Buster Keaton in television commercial for Alka-Seltzer, 1958

On December 21st, 1955 an episode of the anthology drama series *Screen Directors Playhouse* entitled "The Silent Partner" aired on NBC. That week's episode featured three Hollywood stars in their sixties: Joe E. Brown, Zasu Pitts, and Buster Keaton. It told the story of a forgotten silent film star (played by Keaton) who is rescued from obscurity when recognized in a bar while an Academy Award ceremony tribute to him plays on the bar's television set. After recognizing Keaton, a patron (Pitts) from the bar (conveniently located just next door to where the awards ceremony live broadcast is taking place) makes her way to the ceremony and returns with the man (Brown) who had been paying tribute. Keaton's character, who had been watching the broadcast with a somber expression and only reluctantly confirmed his identity, brightens upon reuniting with his former colleague. The story ends when the colleague invites him back to the ceremony where everyone is waiting to fete Keaton and many are talking of making pictures with him again, having been so reacquainted with his talents and past glories through the tribute and accompanying film clips.

This anthology episode is typical of many appearances Keaton would make on television during the 1950s. In most of these appearances, from guest spots on sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show*, drama series like *Route 66*, and a handful of anthology dramas such as *Playhouse 90*, Keaton plays a variation on the part seen in *Screen Director's Playhouse*: a sad, forgotten and lonely old man who must be welcomed back into the community through the charitable actions of still-active (usually much younger) community members. Keaton was far from the only former Hollywood star to find work in television, but he was certainly prolific, first starring in his own variety series *The Buster Keaton Show* (later re-titled *Life with Buster*) from 1949 to 1951, and then making more than sixty documented appearances on other programs between 1949 and 1965. In addition, Keaton was also seemingly omnipresent on television and in print media as the star of numerous advertising campaigns in service to products from Simon Pure beer and Milky Way candy bars to Quaker State motor oil, Kodak film, and, most famously, Alka-Seltzer.

Buster Keaton's late-in-life resurgence, decades after his career peak as one of the most popular comic stars in silent era Hollywood, is no doubt interesting. More importantly, however, it serves as a novel lens with which to examine the space that television provided for Hollywood's first generation of stars to reach old age. This occurs at a unique moment in time in which the film and television industries were undergoing a major process of redefinition and definition, respectively. As demonstrated in the last chapter, such flux allowed for a curious moment in which Hollywood dabbled with selling product to the older end of the American demographic, utilizing older stars to sell

a notion of the sophisticated “adult” picture. At the same time, the early years of television were providing another arena for aging stars to perform and, theoretically, their older fans to enjoy them once again. Once these older stars helped to establish a viewing public for television, however, they were shuffled out of the way to make room for new, youth-centric stars. Much as the “adult” film was no longer a useful device for the film industry by the end of the 1950s, so too does the old star lose his or her usefulness for the television industry by the end of the decade.

In this chapter, I consider this space in which elder stars found a presence in the early television industry, and do so in light of the growing generational divides within media and the culture at large. First, I examine the economic and industrial factors that allowed for such a space to exist, looking to the early days of American television, as well as the intertwined relationship between television and the Hollywood film industry, particularly the latter industry’s stars. This examination reveals a historical moment in which stars in their fifties and sixties, such as Keaton, Swanson, Pitts, Peter Lorre, and Spring Byington, were able to forge extended careers outside of Hollywood, connecting with audiences that may well have been quite different demographically than those still regularly buying theatrical movie tickets. Once television reaches its “golden era,” however, this space grows increasingly narrow, until, by the end of the decade, the available representations of elder characters become progressively more limited and stereotypical.

I begin this examination by looking to the history of early television, as established by scholars such as Susan Murray, Lynn Spigel, and Christine Becker. Their

studies allow me to focus on a topic mentioned only in passing throughout these works—that of the older star and the older audience member—and not previously explored to any depth by the countless others who have built upon their work. I then consider the important role that older stars and nostalgic formats, as well as what one presumes may be a similarly older, nostalgic audience, play in the establishment of television in America, as well as in defining the representation and roles of elder figures within popular culture. As a means of examining these issues on an individual, detailed level, I focus my investigation on Buster Keaton's resurgence, some twenty-five years after his career peaked as a popular comic star in silent era Hollywood. Itself a little-explored area of the otherwise substantial Keaton scholarship, the trajectory of Keaton's career during this period is enlightening in the narrative it provides, in no small part due to the fact that Keaton's work experiences are not unique among his cohort. This career path also follows the tides of industrial changes during these years, allowing one to see how elder kitsch would come to be a consistent trope of representation.

Lastly, this chapter considers the relationship between older stars' changing physical and social place, discussed to some extent in Chapter 1, and the new exhibition space that television provided within American culture. As the audience for television grew and evolved over the course of the 1950s, this led to shifts in content and industry practices which, in turn, worked to confine elder representation to very particular and rigid generic spaces. As the Baby Boomer/Youth market takes center stage in advertising and media into the 1960s, these narrow spaces of representation, particularly elder kitsch, become codified within the cultural landscape, as I explore further in Chapter Four.

An Audience Lost, An Audience Found

As previously discussed, the immediate postwar years of Hollywood were defined by the “lost audience,” with the studios struggling to adapt to the resultant economic changes. Simultaneously, Americans themselves were undergoing vast cultural change, buoyed by government initiatives such as the GI Bill, Social Security, and various housing and corporate incentives. This led to a population that was, in large part, becoming increasingly suburbanized, nuclear, and generationally isolated.

While many older people in America were experiencing a large-scale renegotiation of position within society, many aging Hollywood stars were finding themselves without steady work in the wake of the Paramount Decree and the subsequent decrease in studio productions. Christine Becker’s recent book, *It’s the Pictures That Got Small*, details the large contingents of B-movie stars and character actors left without work as studios increasingly focused on making fewer films, mostly star and spectacle-heavy productions, but such cut-backs affected older stars as well. As an example, one can look to Buster Keaton. Though often described as having “disappeared” after the coming of sound, Keaton worked steadily in poverty row comedy shorts and low-budget comedy cheaters for Columbia throughout the 1930s and was employed behind the scenes at MGM as a comedy writer and consultant in the 1940s.¹⁴² Following the changes in studio production at the end of the 1940s, Keaton, like many stars, began to look for work outside of the Hollywood studios. He hired an agent, Ben Pearson, who

¹⁴² This period of Keaton’s career is examined in depth in James L. Neibaur. *The Fall of Buster Keaton: His Films for MGM, Educational Pictures and Columbia* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press: 2010).

would soon develop a reputation as someone who could get unemployed stars work in the new medium of television.¹⁴³

Pearson is an interesting figure to touch on within this context. Also the manager of Keaton's fifty-something co-stars in the *Screen Director's Playhouse* episode, Joe E. Brown and Zasu Pitts, Pearson began to specialize in finding television and theater work for aging Hollywood stars in 1947. A 1983 *TV Guide* article about Pearson describes his particular niche within the industry, which, by that point, had transitioned from finding aging film stars work on television to finding out-of-favor television stars smaller television roles and work on the stage. As the article describes it:

For the most part, they are stars who are "between series," meaning unemployed. And Benny is what a congressman might call a "safety net," the man who helps them pay their Beverly Hills mortgages and keep up the payments on their imported automobiles. As one rival agent puts it, "When an actor has been in a series for five years, and the show gets canceled, the network doesn't want him anymore." But Ben Pearson does.¹⁴⁴

The writer goes on to note that, "In a Hollywood where people think in terms of multimillion-dollar blockbusters, Benny thinks in terms of thousands, enough of them so that he earns a six-figure income..."¹⁴⁵ Yet Pearson would not be the only person in the industry to foresee the potential value to be gained in repurposing older stars for the new medium of television.

Both Becker and Murray have demonstrated the strategies by which fledgling television networks borrowed stars from radio and film to draw in viewers and establish

¹⁴³ Joseph Finnigan. "Crusty Agent Ben Pearson Specializes in Finding Jobs for Out-of-Work Stars," *TV Guide*, August 6, 1983, 14.

¹⁴⁴ Finnigan (1983), 14.

¹⁴⁵ Finnigan (1983), 15.

the quality of entertainment on offer from the new medium. These included not only big-name radio stars like Milton Berle or Jack Benny, but also older film stars who still had name power, such as Adolphe Menjou, Swanson and Keaton. As many contemporary stars with active studio contracts were forbidden to appear on television until the mid-1950s, these older stars brought a level of prestige to the fledgling industry that, in return, offered them roles and exposure they were unable to obtain elsewhere. As Becker writes:

Although the biggest stars prospered in a new milieu of freedom in Hollywood, featured players and character actors were hurt substantially by the subsequent slowdowns in film production. Television provided a saving grace for many of their careers, as the new medium yearned for nationally recognizable and visually dynamic talent both to attract audiences, sponsors, and financiers to fill its voluminous production schedules.¹⁴⁶

Both Menjou and Swanson played host to anthology drama series, lending their name recognition and respectable presence to showcase others' performances, Menjou hosting *Your Favorite Story* from 1953 to 1954 and Swanson hosting *Crown Theatre with Gloria Swanson* from 1954 to 1955. This position as esteemed host rather than featured performer points toward a transition of roles for older stars from 1953 onward that will be discussed later. For the earliest years, however, as Murray thoroughly demonstrates in *Hitch Your Antenna to the Stars: Early Television and Broadcast Stardom*, it was in the realm of comedy that the popularity of television was truly centered. It was also here where the biggest stars of early television were to be found, most of them veteran performers of late middle age or beyond.

¹⁴⁶ Becker (2008), 3.

While certainly not a star on television to the levels of popularity attained by the likes of Berle or Benny, Keaton closely fits the mold that Murray has laid out for the networks' ideal early television stars. As Murray describes it:

Eventually commentators assumed that the stage comic (trained in vaudeville, burlesque, and night clubs) would be best suited to television work. This was primarily because of the trained comedian's ability to maintain the intensive schedule of television, or his or her penchant for improvisation in live work, and, of course, the broadcast experience that many had acquired on radio. Most importantly, however, stage comics could maximize the visual immediacy of television.¹⁴⁷

Like many of the stars that found work in live television, Keaton had a background in vaudeville. From the age of four until his late teens he performed as part of his family's Irish ethnic comedy act, The Three Keatons. It was there that he perfected the acrobatic style of performance that made him a star in silent film. While Keaton did not have the background in radio that Murray discusses, this kinetic, visually-grounded humor fit into the style of comedy that networks preferred, helping to differentiate television entertainment from radio.¹⁴⁸ All of this was put to use in *The Buster Keaton Show*, which began airing on KTTV Los Angeles in 1949 and was re-titled *Life with Buster Keaton* when it began airing nationally in 1950. Though Keaton tired of the working conditions demanded by putting together a live sketch comedy show with new material each week and stepped down after two seasons, he would remain active in television, to varying

¹⁴⁷ Murray (2005), 41-42.

¹⁴⁸ An interesting irony is that Keaton, and many of his fellow silent film comedy stars, were supplanted by verbally-oriented comedians with the coming of synchronous sound, as Hollywood filmmakers wished to play up the new technology.

degrees, into the 1960s.¹⁴⁹ It is by looking at these years of continuous, varied television work that we can witness the path followed by many older stars in postwar entertainment culture. It was only on television that Keaton could garner the attention he had lost long ago and be the titular star of his own variety show/playhouse format. The new medium needed old stars, and the old stars needed the new medium.

After leaving his own program behind in 1951, Keaton continued to diversify his career. He performed in Paris at the Cirque Medrano, starred in a number of industrial films, appeared in a wide variety of television and print media advertising campaigns, and continued to work steadily on network TV, developing a secondary career as somewhat of a professional guest star. He was also featured in Charles Chaplin's last American film before his exile, *Limelight* (1952). *Limelight*, like many of its contemporary films discussed in the previous chapter, revolves around the reluctance of an aged star (Chaplin) to cede the stage to the younger generation of stars. Its high point is an elaborate vaudeville-style slapstick stage performance by Chaplin and his former partner, played by Keaton. The two silent film stars wear costumes and make-up harkening back to their earliest filmed appearances in the teens and perform a routine that would not have been out of place thirty-five years earlier.

This film appearance, along with many similar television appearances Keaton made, illustrates another quality that networks were looking for during these years in order to lure in viewers to the medium as it continued to expand: familiarity. In addition to familiar star faces, older performance styles, particularly those associated with

¹⁴⁹ Buster Keaton and Charles Samuels. *My Wonderful World of Slapstick* (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 272.

vaudeville, were encouraged for television due to a tendency to draw audiences into a sense of comfort and intimacy with the performer and, in turn, the new technology present in their living rooms. Bolter and Grusin's theory of "remediation" is useful here as they point out that any new medium often relies not only on the content of the old medium but also the functionality and aesthetics of the old medium.¹⁵⁰ The television apparatus as well as its content and audience all harkened back to that of cinema – down to the very stars. As Murray writes that, "vaudeville's presentational mode, in particular, underscored the viewer's familiar relationship with television [...] Leo Bogart claimed that this use of the presentational mode to create a sense of intimacy with the audience when combined with star power led to a program's success."¹⁵¹ The vaudevillian style of comedy naturally acknowledges and plays to the audience, encouraging a sense of belonging, rather than voyeurism or remove. This, coupled with the audible presence of on-set audiences (or replicated "canned" audiences), is designed to invite the viewer in, at the same time setting the new medium up as a friendly presence, rather than an invasive one. The presence of a familiar face, or even a grandmotherly or grandfatherly one, may be seen as adding an additional level of comfort, much as the space-age technologies of the era's new kitchens were often softened with a layer of faux-colonial or old Dutch décor.

A particularly interesting instance of this selling of familiarity in practice can be seen in the "Bucket of Molasses" routine originally performed in Keaton's first film

¹⁵⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

¹⁵¹ Murray (2005), 50.

appearance, 1917's *The Butcher Boy*. Keaton revived the routine for an appearance on *The Ed Wynn Show* in 1949 and subsequently repeated it as a guest star on three more variety shows over the next several years. The scene takes place in an old-fashioned country general store where Keaton, a rube, comes to purchase a bucket of molasses. He lays his five-cent piece inside his wooden buckets and passes it across the counter for the storekeeper (here played by Wynn, played by Fatty Arbuckle in 1917) to fill. The storekeeper, of course, does not see the coin, fills the bucket with molasses and then demands payment, followed by sticky shenanigans as Keaton comes to realize what has happened and attempts to retrieve the coin.

The sketch itself has an instant familiarity to anyone who was a regular viewer of variety shows and the hoary, vaudeville-style humor of their routines. This is underscored by the presentational element of the routine in which, Ed Wynn mugs directly to his studio and at-home audience, inviting that theatrical style of intimacy, making the viewer (even if he or she was watching alone) one of the crowd, assuring that they are in on the joke. Additionally, though, the revival version of the routine adds in humorous references to the conventions of silent cinema itself, including an extended bit of business in which Keaton and his fellow performer hold up cue cards to mimic intertitles, a gag Keaton would repeat in other appearances as well. Such elements provide not only a safe, familiar style of comedy and recognizable performer to welcome viewers into the medium, as Murray describes, but also rely on nostalgic fondness or even knowledge of older styles of comedy, so different from the comedic styles that had been popular in film and radio since the 1930s, which so heavily relied on verbal wit and puns.

This raises the question: familiar to whom? It seems logical to imagine that at least some of the aging audience members lost from the cinema may have provided some of the initial audience for television in its early growth years. We can look to networks and advertisers and see that they were indeed aware of the fact that their programming skewed (or at least was perceived as skewing) toward audiences of a particular generation. Frank Rose's study of the William Morris Agency mentions that in 1951, "research showed that the talent on NBC and CBS—Benny, Burns and Allen—appealed mainly to older people, not the young families in the eighteen-to-forty-nine age bracket who were buying cars and appliances and other big-ticket items that advertisers were eager to push."¹⁵² Victoria Johnson's study of *The Lawrence Welk Show* in *Heartland TV* also discusses the popularity of Welk with older audiences, particularly "blue haired ladies."¹⁵³

Perhaps part of the popularity of these middle-aged and older stars was due to an audience who enjoyed seeing once again the stars they recalled from their own younger years. Rather than just pure nostalgia, however, as Keaton's molasses sketch may imply, such stars were also constantly creating new material (one of the chief difficulties of the job cited by Keaton and his variety show peers) and in the process defining the new medium. Murray notes that networks and sponsors were aware that many of their stars were much older than popular Hollywood stars of the period, something that she cites as a key reason for their ousting in favor of younger stars as the medium matured and grew

¹⁵² Frank Rose. *The Agency: William Morris and the Hidden History of Show Business* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 184. Also quoted in Murray (2005).

¹⁵³ Victoria E. Johnson. *Heartland TV: Primetime Television and the Struggle for US Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 80-84.

in popularity. But for a brief moment of time in the early 1950s, such stars were given primetime showcase. And vaudeville-style, physical comedy, so well-suited to the needs of early live television broadcast, provided a generic space for this to occur.

Realignment of the Stars

As many television historians have pointed out, there is a major shift in the industry beginning in the mid-1950s. Murray defines this largely in relation to the “Talent Crisis” of 1952 that, in part, dealt with concerns that the stars defining the networks up to that point were becoming “overly familiar” to the public. As implied above in Rose’s and Johnson’s mention of network and advertiser awareness of television product that was perceived as appealing to an older audience, this was not felt to be ideal. Whether due wholly to the fact that, as Rose suggests, older Americans were not the purchasing demographic of products television advertisers were selling or because the reputation of appealing to such an audience marked networks as old-fashioned, conscious changes seem to have been made in order to attract a more youthful and presumably more actively consuming audience. The relationship between the Hollywood studios and the networks, as Christine Becker documents, also began to thaw as more studios moved into producing material for television and began loosening restrictions and clauses in star contracts that had previously prohibited television appearances, so A-list film stars increasingly became available for television.

The rising costs and demands of “name” variety show stars, and the long-in-the-tooth perception of these stars, combined with the introduction of telefilm removed many of the constraints dictated by live television, and both NBC and CBS increasingly

centered their schedules around formats like the sitcom and the anthology drama, rather than the stale variety show format with its often costly star contracts. Such programming no longer called for stars with the particular talents in which the variety show performers had specialized, those derived from a vaudeville background nearly exclusive to performers who had reached late middle-age or more. Rather, television stars from this point onward were able to have backgrounds less dependent on vaudeville experience, having trained either in theater, cinema or even, eventually, just television.

The rise of the sitcom at this time did more than negate the need for vaudeville training and curb the desire for networks to sign long-term contracts with big-name variety show hosts. It also put the focus of prime-time television more decidedly on the middle-class, suburban, nuclear family. Popular sitcoms developed earlier in the decade, such as *The Goldbergs* (CBS, 1949-1951, DuMont, 1954), *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-1956),¹⁵⁴ *The Burns and Allen Show* (CBS, 1950-1957), and even the early seasons of *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957) focused on urban life and families who did not necessarily reflect the middle-class, nuclear ideal that would come to dominate postwar culture. The Goldbergs were an ethnic, multi-generational family firmly rooted in their Bronx tenement neighborhood; The Cramdens of *The Honeymooners*, were a working-class and childless Brooklyn couple; Burns and Allen portrayed a version of themselves—professional performers in Hollywood with no mention made of children

¹⁵⁴ *The Honeymooners* only aired as a stand-alone television series for the 1955-1956 season. Prior to this, it aired in different incarnations on the DuMont network's *Calvalcade of Stars* in 1951 and CBS's *The Jackie Gleason Show* from 1952-1955.

until late in the series.¹⁵⁵ *I Love Lucy* most closely reflects the changing focus of television comedy as the decade wore on. Initially concentrated on a sophisticated urban couple, the program then gradually revolved around the introduction of a child and, later, a move to suburban Connecticut. By the mid-1950s, the majority of popular comedies on primetime television, such as *Leave It To Beaver* (CBS, 1957-1958, ABC, 1958-1963), *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966), or *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1960) reflect a much more homogenous, nuclear, and suburban population.

One important exception to this trend worth mentioning is *December Bride*, a popular sitcom that aired on CBS from 1954 to 1959. Starring Spring Byington as Lily, the title character, *December Bride* was a rarity in that it focused on a widow in her sixties. The novelty of the sitcom rests on the fact that Lily not only lives with her daughter's family but that, contrary to expectations, Lily is a delightful presence whose company the family enjoys. The humor of the program came from Lily behaving younger than her years, dating a number of potential suitors and engaging in youthful hijinks, along with her best friend Hilda (also in her sixties), played by Verna Felton. Lily is unbound by the conventions of her age and social position, as evidenced in a typical scene in which Lily and Hilda swing dance a choreographed routine with young bobbysoxers; Lily and Hilda themselves wearing saddle shoes, bobby socks, and oversized sweatshirts—the uniform of their teenage companions. Produced by Desilu, *December Bride* drew much of its popularity no doubt from its time-slot, following *I*

¹⁵⁵ *The Burns and Allen Show* took place initially in suburban Beverly Hills, then moved the characters to a hotel in Manhattan, then returned to Beverly Hills near the end of its run, during which the previously childless Burns and Allen were given a teenage son, who became a major character.

Love Lucy, as well as its plots, which often resulted in physical comedy, reminiscent of *Lucy*.

Press about the program reflects, however, a fascination with the novelty of a grandmother who doesn't act *old* and stays out of her family's business, including multiple promotional interviews with Byington in which she discusses the secrets to being a "good" mother-in-law, grandmother, and elder. A piece entitled "Spring Byington Offers Tips on Staying Young," states:

"Old age," says Spring Byington, "is dread of change. You never grow old if you never mind a change." Miss Byington is the perennially young-minded mother-in-law of "December Bride" (CBS-TV Thursdays, 8 p.m. EDT), enjoys change and admits that she is over 60 years old—as the calendar measures time. But calendar measurements of time can be misleading, she feels.¹⁵⁶

The article notes that Byington recently traveled to Brazil and is working to learn Portuguese before ending with this quote, "'Working helps keep you young,' she said, 'especially if you have a job where you don't do tomorrow exactly what you have done today. Constant change is essential. But people who have retired can find as many changing interests as those who still are working if only they will try.'"¹⁵⁷ Unlike many of the representations of aging previously examined in this project, in which elder characters are reluctant to leave their vocations and pushed into retirement and dependency, the persona represented by Byington here, is that of an elder who has adapted with the times and found happiness by behaving like a younger person. This kind

¹⁵⁶ "Spring Byington Offers Tips on Staying Young," Charles Mercer (AP), *Ocala Star-Banner*, October 20, 1958, 3

¹⁵⁷ "Spring Byington Offers Tips on Staying Young," Charles Mercer (AP), *Ocala Star-Banner*, October 20, 1958, 3

of incongruity will be revisited again in many of the youth-oriented elder roles examined in the following chapter.

The emphasis on maintaining youthful energy and interests into older age is clear in this piece, as is a more subtle exhortation to remain independent of one's children and their nuclear families. Such sentiment is more evident in a number of other promotional articles in which Byington is positioned as an authority on the subject, as an ideal elder/mother-in-law both on television and in real life. The following is worth quoting in its entirety:

Spring Byington has a suggestion of mothers-in-law! 'Take aside your son-in-law or daughter-in-law and say to him or her, 'What may I give you for Christmas? What can I stop doing that I have been doing, or what can I start doing that I have not done?' Miss Byington, spring-like in spirit as she nears the autumn of age, speaks as a television mother-in-law and also as a woman with two married daughters. [...]

The whole subject of mothers-in-law fascinates her. 'Primarily mothers-in-law have a bad name because they haven't been trained for the role. When a son or daughter marries, mama is fired. She never was given a notice. A woman should begin preparing for the role of mother-in-law when she's young and raising her children. She should realize that after they're grown and married she can expect a good 20 or 30 years of vitality. She must say to herself while still young, 'I must think now what I'm going to do then.'

What is the most important thing a mother-in-law can do? 'Sew a little button hole in her upper lip and a button in her lower lip and keep her lips buttoned. Seriously, the best thing a mother-in-law can do is to present herself as a wall off which her children can bounce their ideas. But they must find their own answers. A mother-in-law cannot find the answers for them.'¹⁵⁸

The ideal behavior of the elder, as embodied in both Byington the star and Lily, her television counterpart, is clear. A good elder must recognize that her former place in the social order no longer exists and behave accordingly, essentially speaking when spoken

¹⁵⁸ "Spring Byington Offers Advice to Mothers-In-Law," Charles Mercer, *Meriden Journal*, September 27, 1955, 4.

to, offering experience-based advice only when asked, and setting oneself up as merely a helpmate (financially and otherwise) subservient to the families of ones children.

This is quite different from the ideal elders of earlier media, not only from the reluctantly dethroned elders of the “adult” films in Chapter 2, but also the wise and community-oriented elders of Chapter 1; Capraesque elders, recall, were presented as wise, valued members of their families or communities. This brings up as well the question of who *December Bride* was designed to entertain. From all appearances, the program was very much aiming for a mainstream (family) audience in presenting an elder who is an ideal figure for those who did not reflect Byington’s age and status in real life. For those who did resemble Byington in generation, the trade-off in keeping ones mouth shut and developing a life as independent as possible from your children (Mama has been fired, after all) is that you may still be seen as likeable and, even, possibly attractive. Show creator William Parke addresses this in a 1958 interview: “What is the secret entertainment on a TV show glorifying a mother-in-law? ‘Empathy,’ Parke said. ‘A mental entrance into the feeling or spirit of a person. We make every woman over 40 feel she’s eligible for romance. Lily and her friend Hilda (Verna Felton) are believable and intelligent and have fun. Audiences love them.’”¹⁵⁹ It is also interesting to point out that Byington, who was 72 at the time of Parke’s interview and had been playing elder characters since the late 1930s, is here positioned as a role model for women in their forties. Once again, the idea of the elder and the concept of “old” is both situational and malleable.

¹⁵⁹ Erskine Johnson. “December Bride,” *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, January 26, 1958, 20.

Byington in *December Bride* appears to be much more the exception in this time period than the rule, with her starring primetime role. Though older stars did, for the most part, disappear from the primary star roles offered at the height of variety shows' popularity, they did not disappear from television entirely. Rather, like Keaton, they shifted into featured or guest-starring spots. In these roles, which, with few exceptions, can be categorized within a comedic or melodramatic generic space, they were no longer simply stars running the show or filling the bill as one among a number of other acts. Rather, they were old stars playing "old" characters. The episode of *Screen Directors Playhouse* described at the beginning of this chapter is typical of this period, with Keaton playing the sad, old man who is maybe clumsy or funny but always, undeniably, "old." Keaton's appearances on sitcoms like *The Donna Reed Show*, dramas such as *Route 66* and *The Greatest Show on Earth*, and anthologies like *Playhouse 90* or *Douglas Fairbanks Jr. Presents* all repeat this role. In *The Greatest Show on Earth* Keaton literally plays an old French mime who is displaced within the circus due to his dated style of comedy that, we are told, audiences no longer value. He is rescued from his life of backstage manual labor by a new, young recruit to the circus who arranges for a center ring revival of the clown's performance. Much like the ending of Keaton's episode of *Screen Director's Playhouse*, Keaton's past triumphs, previously discarded as dated, are appreciated anew. Notably, however, Keaton's character is only shown in this particular episode—he is never seen again in the series.

Alternatively, Keaton also appeared throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s in a number of what may be termed "nostalgia roles," in which, rather than simply playing a

sad/silly old man character, he plays “himself” or a role that relies heavily on his cinematic star persona and presents him as a curiosity from an earlier era. These are bolstered by Paramount’s release of a high-profile biopic loosely based on his life story, *The Buster Keaton Story* (Sidney Sheldon, 1957) and a series of promotional television appearances and print media interviews in conjunction with the biopic. Keaton makes standard, nostalgic appearances as himself on celebrity staples, *This is Your Life* and *What’s My Line*, in which the focus is entirely on a retrospective view of his career of the 1920s and little, if any, mention is made of his prolific recent career on stage and television and in advertising. A 1961 episode of *The Twilight Zone* is an example of fictional treatment in this nostalgic vein. The plot of the episode, entitled, “Once Upon a Time,” has Keaton as a man from the 1890s transported into the modern age and serves as a loose excuse to recreate slapstick sequences from Keaton’s 1920s film work. Comedic play with silent era intertitles also returns, as the only form of communication in Keaton’s 1890s world, accompanied by ragtime piano music. The episode’s author, science fiction writer Richard Matheson, also penned several of the Roger Corman-directed “Poe” films for AIP, discussed in the following chapter, which also feature a number of aged stars in kitschy nostalgia roles.

Such “nostalgia” roles were certainly not limited to Keaton—the existence and popularity of a program like *This is Your Life*, as well frequent trips to the fallen movie star biopic well on the part of Hollywood producers in films such as *The Eddie Cantor Story* (Alfred E. Green, 1953), *I’ll Cry Tomorrow* (Daniel Mann, 1955) or *The Helen Morgan Story* (Michael Curtiz, 1957), provide a regular appearance space for older stars,

in addition to guest spots. These nostalgia roles bring the question back, once again to audience. Of what age must the intended audience be in order to understand jokes about intertitles, musical accompaniment to silent films, or other cinematic conventions that had not *been* conventional in American movie entertainment for decades? If the humor is not based on recognition or memory, then is it wholly reliant on the “absurdity” of an earlier, more naïve technology and behavior? To whom was such nostalgia entertainment pitched?

Additionally, this nostalgia entertainment points to, if not an interest in these stars for their own sake, an interest on the part of television networks in putting to use these utterly available older stars in some capacity in order to fill up the schedule. It is the space we see them fill, so different from that which they occupied earlier in television history that is curious. The emphasis of much of this entertainment—with *This is Your Life* as perhaps the quintessential nostalgia entertainment—is an emphasis on age and looking back. The narrative is almost unfailing a redemption arc in which a conclusion of sorts (the prototypical “Hollywood ending”) is reached in one’s life. The highs and lows of ones life are happily wrapped up in under an hour, shiny sponsor gifts are given, everyone takes a moment to appreciate the achievement of having lived a happily concluded life, then the subject is sent off and, once again, forgotten.

In this format, old age is packaged into something appealing, whether it is the tidy story with a happy ending, or simply the notion of young-at-heart mother-in-law who can engage with the kids. It is partially appealing in its separation from “normal” life—older stars in these instances become a novelty, “exotics,” as gerontologists Richard Davis and

James Davis might term them.¹⁶⁰ They are not presented as “of” the contemporary moment. Instead, they are relics of an earlier era, entertaining briefly with their chronological exoticism. When such exotics interact with contemporary culture, they must either be redeemed by those truly “of” the contemporary moment, or embraced ironically, their anachronistic interactions with the contemporary world treated as utter kitsch. An older star is either sadly obsolescent, evoking maudlin sympathy, or the star is delightfully incongruous, provoking laughter, a duality that I explore further in the following chapter.

Another part of the apparent appeal in such roles is the way in which they emphasize the value of youth. Contemporary cultural participants (those separate from the figures marked as “old” and therefore “not old”) redeem such figures by shining attention on them once again, even if for the limited time of a one-off sitcom episode or an hour with Ralph Edwards on *This Is Your Life*. Even Spring Byington the actress and her character are made appealing through their association with youth, youthful attitudes, as well as their ability to know when to step out of the way and allow the rightful holders of cultural importance to take center stage. And take center stage in the culture, the “not old” do. Young families and, increasingly, youth culture begin to dominate American popular culture in this period and with it, television content and advertising.

In the world of postwar television, this turn toward youth-centric programming seems to have its roots in the surprising mid-decade success of third-ranked network ABC. From its entry into television broadcasting in 1948, the ABC network was at a

¹⁶⁰ Richard H. Davis and James A. Davis, eds. *TV's Image of the Elderly: A Practical Guide for Change* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985).

distinct disadvantage comparative to CBS and NBC, who had earlier access to the biggest and most lucrative station markets, as documented in William Boddy's industrial history *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*. ABC's strategy, then, was largely to define itself in opposition to the bigger networks, pursuing a more specialized demographic and offering programming that differed greatly from that which defined the primetime of NBC and CBS, targeting young families with special emphasis on children and teens. In opposition to the variety and vaudeo-star programs that dominated the primetime schedules of CBS and NBC, ABC counterprogrammed by drawing not from the pool of established radio and vaudeville stars, but by collaborating closely with Hollywood studios looking to experiment with television, including Warner Bros. and Disney.

As Christopher Anderson writes, "ABC's programming strategy was built on the belief that television's fundamental appeal was less its ability to deliver exotic events than its promise of a familiar cultural experience."¹⁶¹ In contrast to the familiar cultural experience offered by older vaudeo stars in the variety shows and sitcoms of NBC and CBS, ABC's familiar cultural experience had much more to do with reproducing Hollywood-style offerings for home. The Warner Bros. programming, like *The Lone Ranger* and *Warner Bros. Presents*, was very much in the style of low-budget films, often genre-based, offering the familiarity of generic convention and Hollywood storytelling rather than the novelty of the variety show format or the spectacle of big (but aging) vaudeo stars. The Disney collaborations offered to the youngest viewers the familiarity of

¹⁶¹ Christopher Anderson. *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 140.

popular Disney characters, storytelling conventions, and aesthetics. ABC allowed Disney to expand its empire into a new medium, basically a continuation of the cross-promotional storytelling and merchandizing already established in movie theaters, toy stores, comic books, and the anticipated (and much-hyped on ABC) amusement park, Disneyland [source?].¹⁶² Regarding the appeal of television to Disney, Anderson writes:

With the home as its primary exhibition site, television gave Disney unparalleled access to a family audience that he had already cultivated more effectively than any Hollywood producer in the studio era. As a result of the postwar baby boom, Disney's target audience of children between the ages of five and fourteen grew from 22 million in 1940 to 35 million in 1960. Television provided the surest route to this lucrative market.¹⁶³

The runaway success of the Disney-ABC relationship had particular impact in terms of what it meant not only for advertisers (who very much wanted to tap the valuable youth and young family consumer market) but also for programming. Combined with the bad feelings brought about by the talent crisis of 1952 and subsequent uneasiness regarding the high price and long-term contracts of powerful vaudeo stars, the success of ABC in 1954 and 1955 appears to have pushed NBC and CBS to begin aping the strategies of the smaller network. Boddy, Anderson, and Murray all demonstrate the ways in which ABC's success, particularly with Disney, changed the content and economic structure of network television by the decade's end.

This movement away from courting audiences through the use of established stars and toward family and youth-friendly programming is important to consider, particularly in the way that many television and cultural critics bemoaned the changes, harkening

¹⁶² Anderson (1994), 133.

¹⁶³ Anderson (1994), 135.

back to the critical discourse in the previous chapter which excoriated Hollywood for its juvenile products. Boddy thoroughly documents that in the early and mid-1950s, many critics writing about the new medium were excited about its potential as an important art form, untainted by the juvenile and unsophisticated sensibilities of Hollywood. Many of these critics, including Gilbert Seldes, praised television programming that strayed from low-budget, Hollywood-like telefilm productions, instead offering live drama featuring New York thespians that encouraged a sense of immediacy, intimacy, and lack of artifice, what Seldes described as an “overwhelming feeling of reality.”¹⁶⁴ Such excitement was encouraged in particular by the use of respected dramatists and stars, many hailing from legitimate theater, and the play-like form of the live anthology drama. This sensibility appears very much akin to the qualities that critics had previously been shown demanding and praising in the Hollywood “adult” film.

Just as Hollywood largely abandoned specifically producing and promoting the “adult” film by the end of the decade, so too did television move away from critically acclaimed but also difficult to sell and often censor-challenged “adult” television. The established older stars of vaudeville and radio and their old-fashioned style of entertainment were phased out, along with the live drama anthology and its sophisticated subject matter and critically praised “writer-artists.” They were traded in for advertiser-friendly, independently-produced telefilm programming designed to appeal not to a “small class of eggheads” (presumably, critics and older adults) but to a younger, less

¹⁶⁴ William Boddy. *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990,) 84.

discerning “mainstream.”¹⁶⁵ Much as Hollywood used older stars in the 1950s to sell an idea of quality, cachet, and sophistication, so too did television. And just as these same stars become no longer useful for this purpose in Hollywood by the end of the decade, so too are they displaced on television.

Primetime Marginalization and the Formation of a Comedic Type

That older stars were continuously relegated to comedic or melodramatic roles by the end of the 1950s sets up a pattern of representation that still largely holds to this day. The generic spaces of comedy and melodrama are very closely aligned and one could argue that camp, the generic space that became home to many an aging film star at this time, is the territory created by the overlap between them. Each also deals with a confrontation, humorous or tragic, with the incongruities of life and society. As Linda Williams argues in her concept of “body genres,” it is genres like these that elicit a bodily and cathartic response on the part of the viewer.¹⁶⁶ As such response relies on viewer identification with the physical and emotional experiences of the body on screen, one can imagine that such effects may have been even stronger with viewers who recognized bodies and faces like their own.

When there is a disconnect, however, when the faces and bodies onscreen are separated from the viewer through a reading of difference, in this case marked as “old,” the response on the part of spectators is quite different. The figures on screen marked as “old” may instead be seen as either sad and pathetic or amusing in a non-threatening,

¹⁶⁵ Boddy (1990), 237.

¹⁶⁶ Linda Williams. “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess” in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 207-21.

almost neutered way. As just a single example of the non-threat of old age characters, one can look to the ending of Keaton's "molasses" routine. In the routine as performed on *The Ed Wynn Show* and subsequent television appearances, Keaton's character loses his pants and is forced to walk out onto the public street in his underwear. With the fifty-five-year-old Keaton performing this gag, it is simply amusing. Had the same ending occurred in the original film with the virile, 21-year-old Keaton, such a gag may have been seen as a bit more sexually threatening. Additionally, there is the additional level of laughter-provoking embarrassment in the revealing of Keaton's aged, imperfect body in underwear that would not have been present had this part of the gag been performed so many decades earlier.

Keaton's character during this period also epitomizes one of the most popular "funny old people" types—one based on contrasting visible old age with unexpectedly youthful thoughts and activities. This can be seen particularly within his prolific advertising work, which usually feature miniature Keaton-esque slapstick gags, but also with his guest appearances on quiz shows and talk shows as "himself" and even in more staid guest acting gigs. As a weathered, withered figure performing his colossal pratfalls in the molasses routine, turning somersaults on *The Martha Rae Show*, bouncing on a trampoline to sell Jeeps or lassoing himself to pitch Alka-Seltzer, Keaton is an incongruous delight. This idea of comic incongruity, embodied here by Keaton and by a number of other performers as elder kitsch fully develops as a trope in the 1960s and 1970s, is a comedy and performance trope that does not go away. Rather, it becomes normalized and increasingly codified in years to come. In the following chapter I explore

this, using Williams's notion of "body genres" as a lens to further reveal the cultural significance of its popularity.

As I end this chapter considering the pleasure and displeasure offered up by elder faces on television in the postwar era, I offer up an indelible image from the 1956 Douglas Sirk melodrama *All That Heaven Allows*, which has often been read as Hollywood commentary on the rival medium of television. I believe this scene also has some value in light of this chapter's subject matter. At the point of greatest despair in the film, Cary (Jane Wyman) has given up the love of her life (younger man Rock Hudson) in order to please her scandalized adult children who feel that their mother's place was in their childhood home, living the respectable, if isolated, life of a well-to-do widow, rather than dating a younger man and experimenting with his youthful, bohemian lifestyle. It is Christmas, and Cary has dressed the house in excessive Holiday décor, eagerly awaiting the arrival of her son and daughter. When they do arrive, however, they are rushed and dismissive, eager to return to their own lives and announce that they have decided that Cary should sell the family home ("It's too big for one person," her son explains), as they no longer wish to be returning frequently and responsible for the home (or, presumably, their mother). To keep her company in her new unspecified residence, they have purchased her a television set. The television salesman arrives at that moment with the new set adorned with a shiny red bow. As he wheels the set into position directly in front of Cary, the salesman intones, "All you have to do is turn that dial and you have all the company you could want there on the screen. Drama. Comedy. Life's parade at your fingertips." The scene fades out as Cary, horrified, stares at her tired, hopeless visage

reflected on the glass of the screen. The reflection of her own aged face and hopeless position framed inside the television set appears to strike Cary as utterly depressing.

In my description of this scene, as well as my analysis in this chapter, we have seen elders being used to serve a very specific purpose, whether it is selling early television programming or providing a never-changing source of nostalgia for Cary's grown children (and others of their generation). There is also a sense of not knowing quite what to do with these elder figures, now that they are no longer necessary for these particular purposes. Elder stars are shuffled into nostalgia roles and comedy; Cary's children wish to send her off to a retirement home with a television set for company. Most importantly, however, these examples further demonstrate a sense of generational conflict during the 1950s that ends with the younger generation taking center stage and their elder figures all but occasionally forgotten.

Chapter 4

Agesploitation: Genre and the Aging Body

“[*Lady in a Cage*] adds Olivia deHavilland to the list of cinema actresses who would apparently rather be freaks than be forgotten.” *Time*, June 19, 1964

As discussed in the previous chapters, by the late 1950s American popular culture was beginning to undergo a change from the production of mass entertainment, envisioned as appealing to the broadest audience possible, to one more demographically varied, consciously designed to attract more narrow, niche audiences. While certain attempts, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, had been made to appeal to audiences such as those of the sophisticated, middle-aged adult, by far the largest group targeted was the youth market, specifically the teenagers and young adults of the Baby Boom generation. As Thomas Doherty writes, regarding this youth audience:

In the 1950s, market research firms began to document a peculiar trend in consumerism, one that in the 1960s would become a commonplace of American life: teenagers were often the opinion leaders for the rest of the culture. [...] Although creators of entertainment had always paid some attention to the youth market, the demographic realities of the 1950s encouraged them to consider it as never before. Henceforth teenagers would have a major, sometimes dominant, voice in determining the nation’s cultural diet.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Doherty (2002), 42-43.

In this chapter, I examine the peculiar role that elder stars played in Hollywood films as the industry began shifting its focus to these younger audiences and cultural tastemakers. By the mid-1960s, the most reliable way to market elders within an increasingly youth-focused media culture was to position them to be appreciated in a kitschy fashion. To understand this development, we must add to the historical and cultural context already delineated in previous chapters and consider it within a generic context. On one level, it is important to consider genre pictures because of the tradition of directly addressing social issues in such films. Highly generic films have customarily been viewed by the public at large (and, until more recently, by many cultural critics) as less “important” than those less tied to generic formula, unworthy of extended examination. Because of this lower-culture ghettoization, such films have often been allowed to fly under the radar, to address controversial topics more directly than other films that are more highly scrutinized and less bound to the conventions that set genre films apart as less “real” and therefore less “serious.” In this way, genre pictures have come to be viewed as unique spaces in which one can witness the anxieties of particular cultural moments addressed in an often overt and spectacular fashion. Regarding the unique social position that genre pictures hold in addressing a society’s cultural anxieties, Judith Hess Wright writes:

These films came into being and were financially successful because they temporarily relieved the fears aroused by a recognition of social and political conflicts; they helped to discourage any action that might otherwise follow upon the pressure generated by living with these conflicts. Genre films produce satisfaction rather than action. Pity and fear rather than revolt.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Judith Hess Wright. “Genre Films and the Status Quo” in *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 42.

Just as one can unpack American anxieties about communism through examining postwar science fiction films or civil rights in postwar Westerns, so too can we use genre as a window into anxieties about the aging in an increasingly youth-focused postwar culture where the young nuclear family was the center of all things and white, middle class adolescents were the tastemakers for the culture at large.

On another level, it is important to consider genre pictures within this study due to the simple fact that such films became a refuge of sorts for aging stars following the disintegration of the studio system. Just as television offered a new performance venue to Hollywood actors no longer in demand, genre pictures in the 1950s and 1960s often took advantage of available, slightly tarnished stars (whether by age, scandal, or inactivity) to boost caché or audience interest. Additionally, genre films, so often reaching into the contemporary arena for new material to enliven their conventions, use these stars in texts that address societal fears about aging, and the sexual and cultural obsolescence it portended to bring with it.

Lastly, the development of a comedic trope cannot be fully comprehended if removed from its particular comedy context (in this case, the rise of mass camp in the 1960s). The roles of elder stars in specific generic contexts during this period are important to understanding the cultural significance the elder kitsch trope eventually takes on. While comedy, including camp, is ultimately the focus of this dissertation, the representation of elders in melodrama and horror—genres across which camp was gaining a popular foothold—help to inform elder kitsch within its comedic context. Such films were created for and marketed to age-stratified audiences in ways that celebrated

and valorized youth while pushing the elderly into exploitative territories, contributing to the formation of the elder kitsch trope that becomes so familiar in the decades following.

Comedy, horror, and melodrama all revolve around extreme representations and extreme emotions, with each presenting a unique space for both the star and the spectator. I argue that there is a connection in these generic representations between the visual extreme of the aging body and the physical release provided to audiences by these “body” genres. The notion of these groups of films as “body” genres comes from the work of Linda Williams and serves as a useful lens for approaching and understanding elder kitsch. While I touched on this concept briefly in the introduction to this dissertation and to an extent in the previous chapter, Williams’s theoretical construct plays a greater role in this last chapter. It serves, first, as an organizing structure for the chapter and as a reference point for the discussion of each relevant generic representation. Secondly, this theoretical concept leads into my unpacking of the significance of the elder kitsch trope for audiences and the culture at large.

In her essay “Film Bodies: Genre, Gender and Excess,”¹⁶⁹ Williams posits that some genres, specifically the ‘low’ genres (in her argument, melodrama, horror, and pornography) are particularly attractive to a film-going public because of the way in which their films elicit a physical reaction from viewers.¹⁷⁰ This reaction comes about

¹⁶⁹ Williams (2002), 207-221.

¹⁷⁰ Many of the specific examples that Williams chooses to use in her ‘low’ categories are problematic in this regard. *Psycho* (1960) is more likely to be termed a ‘masterpiece’ than ‘trash,’ while *Stella Dallas* (1937) is a staple of classical Hollywood courses. *Ordinary People*, Williams’s example of a ‘male weepie,’ won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1980. This distinction of ‘the low’ hardly seems essential to the arguments that Williams pursues. In similar fashion, many of the films that I discuss in this chapter

through a representation on the screen of a body experiencing the state of excessive physical or emotional sensation, and the spectator's identification with that screen body. In the previous chapter, I touched on this notion in regards to the particular comedic attraction of Buster Keaton as an older star, as well as the gradual disappearance of elder faces in starring roles on television. In the following sections, I return to Hollywood, applying these ideas within their individual generic contexts, using specific filmic examples to consider the roles such stars/characters played within the social texts of these films and the purpose they perhaps served for the postwar audience.

Melodrama

In the postwar years, melodrama experienced what many scholars now describe as a golden era in Hollywood. Though the genre had always had a presence in American cinema, particularly during its first decades, the 1950s saw the genre flourish artistically, critically, and popularly. The best known examples of such films are, of course, those of Douglas Sirk: luscious Technicolor melodramas made for Universal, such as *Magnificent Obsession* (1954), *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), and *Imitation of Life* (1959). In addition to the Sirkian melodramas and Nicholas Ray's similarly auteurist melodramatic output, however, a number of other high-profile, "mainstream" films of the era also have strong melodramatic components and share in the conventions of the genre, be they what Thomas Elsaesser defines as "family melodramas," like *Giant* (1956) or *My Son John*

would not be considered "lowbrow" either today or during the period of their initial release. They do, however, share enough of the conventions and other attributes of their respective genres to be considered from a generic perspective, along with the less highbrow films most commonly associated with these genres.

(1952), or even sophisticated “adult” films, like our previously discussed *Sunset Boulevard*. or *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *East of Eden* (1955). While these films cross into any number of loose generic categories, from *film noir* to social problem film and even western (*Johnny Guitar*, 1954), they all overtly demonstrate characteristics of the melodrama. These include excessive expressions of emotion, an overt moralizing quandary, and a character at odds with the society that surrounds him or her.

That the melodramatic mode operates so strongly in Hollywood during the postwar period perhaps can be related to the era’s cultural fixation on morality, repression, and even a popular fascination with Freudian psychoanalysis. Scholars, such as Christine Gledhill have discussed the function of the melodrama in American society, particularly during the genre’s postwar heyday as presenting a cathartic manifestation of the Freudian “return of the repressed” within the safe confines of an entertaining Hollywood film.¹⁷¹ In this sense, resentments, anxieties, and desires, repressed by the era’s emphasis on public conformity to more narrowly defined social performances than in previous decades (stricter gender roles, greater emphasis on patriotism and capitalist/consumerist displays, etc.), bubbled up and found expression through the emotional excesses of such films. The attraction in viewing them, then, came from a cathartic release otherwise rarely available without the risk of breaching social propriety.

An additional factor in the popularity of such films at this time might be the climate of Hollywood and its attempts to appeal to non-youthful audiences as an exhibition strategy, which I explored in Chapter Two. According to Barbara Klinger, the

¹⁷¹ Christine Gledhill. “Rethinking Genre” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 2000,) 228.

melodramas of the postwar period (particularly the films of Sirk) blossomed due in part to their inclusion under the umbrella of the “adult” film, offering a way of viewing sensational topics under the cover of an adult label and, therefore, supposedly sophisticated. In her examination of Sirk’s *Written on the Wind*, Klinger ties this notion in with the argument that it was a filmic expression of the “return of the repressed” that attracted viewers during this period. She writes:

What I am arguing here is that during the 1950s such a “culturally specific” construction of generic identity for *Written on the Wind* and other melodramas occurred. It occurred through affiliation with a transitory “local genre”—the adult film—forged by a mixture of institutional and social factors. This generic frame selectively activated filmic elements, such as psychosexual and romantic conflicts, tormented characters, and erotic performances, to foster an ideological identity for the film which was commensurate with the era’s strong emphasis on sexual display. This climate, underwritten by a renewed heterosexual fervor in the anticommunist, post-World War II years, created a voyeuristic audience ethos focused on the objectification of women and a lurid sensationalizing of social problems and human relationships.¹⁷²

In this sense, the melodrama, along with melodramatic conventions apparent in more “mainstream” films and other genres, experienced a decade or so of popularity due to a confluence of industrial, social, and cultural factors as well as, perhaps, related psychic needs on the part of the movie-going public.

An important element, however, is that so many of these melodramatic films featured plotlines focusing on the difficulties of an aging person (usually a woman) who must struggle with her changing role within society. Sirk’s films provide some of the

¹⁷² Klinger (1994), 56.

most vivid examples of this.¹⁷³ I have previously mentioned *All That Heaven Allows*, in which the protagonist, an upper-middle class widow, falls in love with her much younger working class gardener and faces resistance and shunning from her social circle and own adult children as a result. Two of Sirk's other biggest films during this time, *Magnificent Obsession* and *Imitation of Life*, also deal with similar subject matter.

In *Magnificent Obsession*, featuring the same two leads as in *All That Heaven Allows* (Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson), Wyman again plays a widow, Helen, attracted to Hudson, Bob. Helen has been left financially vulnerable by her late husband, a highly respected local doctor and then, after staying true to her husband's memory and her prescribed social role and rejecting the advances of the younger, disreputable Bob, is struck by a car and blinded. Helen's situation continues to deteriorate as she is told her blindness is incurable; she retreats from local society, and grows increasingly isolated and more ill. Helen essentially disappears from the narrative until it is time for her to return through a device by which the newly redeemed Bob can complete his transformation into a worthy member of society by performing a risky brain surgery on her, curing her illness and blindness. Thus Helen, we are led to believe, may be able to reintegrate into her society and again take on her role as the noble widow and steward of her late husband's legacy.

Imitation of Life has been an object of analysis for many scholars who typically focus on racial inter- and intra-relations, but an alternate reading of this conflict as

¹⁷³ Other major melodramas from this period that contain similar plotlines concerning an older woman and her romantic and social difficulties include *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Peyton Place* (1957), *A Summer Place* (1959), and *Return to Peyton Place* (1961).

generational as well as racial provides an equally important feature of this film. Sirk's final film follows the story of a widowed woman, Lora (Lana Turner), attempting to navigate her new position in society. While the film focuses initially on her early widowhood, when she is relatively young and struggling to support her small daughter, the majority of the plot takes place later on when Lora has become a professional success yet still struggles to balance her romantic life with her sense of propriety as a middle-aged widow with a teenage daughter. While Lora is tending to her career, her daughter develops a crush on Lora's boyfriend, putting Lora in the anxiety-provoking position of competing with a younger woman who is also her daughter for the affections of a middle-aged man. In addition to Lora's character, the film also features the saga of another middle-aged mother, Annie (Juanita Moore), an African-American woman who acts as Lora's nanny, housekeeper, and confidant, and who is raising her own daughter along with Lora's daughter. Annie, presented as saintly and asexual, compared to Lora, is shown dealing with generational struggles with her daughter, mostly in terms of race. Annie objects to her light-skinned daughter's desire to use her ability to "pass" as white in order to get ahead in the world and this dispute is presented as one rooted in the daughter's desire to break away not only from her stigmatized race but also from her mother's generational viewpoint and acceptance of the status quo. After her daughter disowns her mother and runs off to live the life she seeks, Annie, in the ultimate melodramatic turn, dies of a broken heart. Only then, with the loss of her saintly mother and the celebration of her life with an elaborate funeral to end all funerals (including a

parade and a gospel choir led by Mahalia Jackson), does Annie's daughter understand the error of her own ways and admit to having loved her beleaguered mother.

In all of these films, age and its attendant vulnerabilities are used to underscore the pathos of their melodramatic plotting. While none deals directly with women who are already elderly, they rely on still-attractive but past-their-box-office-prime actresses to portray the difficulties and anxieties of woman being shifted out of their previously central social roles and starting down the path toward actual elderliness. From a practical perspective, the casting of such older actresses and the focus on the concerns of the aging woman can be seen as deliberate choices made by the studios in their attempt to appeal to the same older audience members sought in their mainstream "adult" pictures.

Additionally, the circumstances of the older, established woman provide a useful plot device, offering novel obstacles to be overcome (compared to the conflicts of traditional younger heroines) and stricter social boundaries to confine the characters, an advantageous element to melodramatic conventions. As Tom Schatz writes, such films, "involve the courtship of an older woman, invariably a widow or divorcee, whose adult status and established familiar role minimize the possibility for flight from her repressive environment."¹⁷⁴ In melodrama, the greater the social constrictions are, the greater the dramatic value and, theoretically, the greater the potential for psychic release.

If adult films, particularly the melodramas Klinger would include under that umbrella, rely on timely and currently sensational topics for material, we can also understand the plight of the aging woman as fitting neatly into the social context of the

¹⁷⁴ Thomas Schatz. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (New York: Random House, 1981), 233.

period. There is, for one thing, a new isolation of elder Americans brought on by the various social and political factors previously outlined. The plotlines of these films are infused with anxiety about potential and, often, seemingly inevitable, isolation, whether it is through community shunning, blindness and disability, or simply the expectation that an older woman should stay inside her empty nest with only her television for company and entertainment. One way or another, the threat of losing a public role, purpose, or place, is looming.

Additionally, such plots are timely and sensational in the sense of a desire to witness a woman (particularly an older woman who, as Schatz points out, is even more restricted than younger counterparts) transgress the ever-tightening social boundaries placed on her during the postwar years. While such transgression may be disruptive or upsetting in lived reality, film, the emotionally excessive and cathartic melodrama especially, keeps transgression confined to a hypothetical world while still providing a vicarious thrill for the viewer. These films portray a fantasy along with the pathos. In addition to the consumerist fantasy of Sirk's characteristically excessive *mise-en-scène*, the plots act out a kind of wish fulfillment in which the threat of isolation and vulnerability brought on with aging are thwarted. With the exception of Juanita Moore's character in *Imitation of Life*, the older woman ends each picture having managed to escape the confines of her previous social position, side-step the pending threat of isolation, and reach a point of new and renewed confidence and self-actualization. That this escape so often comes about through the necessary intervention of a virtuous (and younger) man reinforces not only the strict gender roles of the era, but also the

generational power dynamic. It is not the wisdom of the experienced that leads to ultimate contentment, but the unorthodoxy and bravado of the young. Such dynamics keep the fantasy from becoming, perhaps, too fantastic and from presenting a culturally distasteful portrayal of a woman with too much power or ambition.

As we can see, when examining representations of elder figures in film during the postwar period, the topic of gender and sexuality cannot be ignored. Beyond the representations addressed in this dissertation, there is, of course, the well known trope of the “silver fox,” a dashing, worldly, older male lead, usually presented as an object of admiration to both sexes, and paired romantically with a younger, very attractive actress. The availability of such roles to the older star appears to have depended most importantly on gender; actresses like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Ginger Rogers were certainly as famous in their box office heyday as Cary Grant or James Stewart, yet Davis, Crawford, and Rogers found no female equivalent to the silver fox on offer in their later years. Instead, in films like *All About Eve*, *The Best of Everything* (1959), and *Forever Female* (1953), they play aging women forced to reckon with the decline in their power to attract and influence those around them and forced, ultimately, to accept a diminished role in their worlds in order to find contentment. The existence of the silver fox role might be understood as a hold over of the traditional economic power of the older man (discussed in the Introduction), theoretically amassed over a lifetime, with money a symbolic stand-in for virility. By the same token, the non-existence of an equivalent role for older actresses can be understood as a holdover of the crone, with the loss of fertility symbolically associated with the loss of attraction.

It is through “low” genre representations, however that the elder kitsch trope becomes normalized as a common representation within the culture. And, with few exceptions, representations of older stars that do not fit the “silver fox” role are segregated by genre and gender, with older women featured in melodrama and horror, and feminized older men taking on the comedic roles. In the latter two genres, the notion of an elder figure possessing and acting upon sexual desires is met with revulsion (in horror) and mockery (in comedy). In the realm of melodrama, however, we find a curious space in which older women are allowed to have and express their sexuality without being presented as either a monster or a joke. Unlike other films, in which the sexuality of the older woman is either wholly absent or employed for shock value, postwar melodramas offered an acknowledgement that an older woman might indeed possess sexual desires and sexual attractiveness that are validated by the (usually younger) men around her.

In regard to gender in melodrama, while it is true that women dominate in the elder character plotlines of postwar films, we do still see representation of male elder characters if not in women’s weepies, then in other melodrama-inflected films popular at the time. Two of the most famous melodramatic portrayals of older men are John Wayne in the Western *The Searchers* and Rock Hudson (in gray face) at the end of the epic/family melodrama *Giant*, both films released to good box office and critical acclaim in 1956. For both of these characters, sexual desires and romance are referenced but treated as concerns of the past. Instead, both are focused on being the leader of a family in the western/southwestern frontiers, one who is unwilling to cede power or authority to

younger male kin. Wayne and Hudson are presented as highly capable, experienced figures but, marking these films as firmly of the postwar period, the value of their experience and capability is undercut by their inability to fit in with the popular cultural attitudes around them. In each case, they espouse a racist viewpoint clearly presented as outdated that distances them from the upcoming generations. Each of these men is ultimately forced to face these bigoted views and overcome them in isolated acts to keep their families together and save patriarchal face before they cede power to the younger generation. Like the older women of melodrama, Wayne and Hudson are forced to leave their previous place in society rather than carry on where they are no longer necessary or relevant. For Hudson this means stepping back from his role as head of the family oil empire and enjoying his dotage as a sedentary grandfather; in Wayne's case, *The Searchers* ends with the film literally closing the door on his image as he walks away from civilized society.

Regarding the golden age of the melodrama, Tom Schatz writes that:

The melodrama reached its equilibrium at the same time that certain filmmakers were beginning to subvert and counter the superficial prosocial thematics and clichéd romantic narratives that had previously identified the genre. No other genre films, not even the “anti-Westerns” of the same period, projected so complex and paradoxical a view of America, at once celebrating and severely questioning the basic values and attitudes of the mass audience.¹⁷⁵

In examining these representations of the aging in melodramatic films of the postwar period, we can clearly witness a questioning of the contemporary social attitudes toward elders and the ways in which such attitudes limited the social experience available to the aging. Rather than offering solutions to what is clearly presented as a frightening and

¹⁷⁵ Schatz (1981), 223.

undesirable reality, or calls to change, however, these films ultimately conform to the role of genre pictures, as espoused by Judith Hess Wright. Melodramatic representation in the postwar era clearly shows that social irrelevance awaits the aging. It draws on its audience's anxieties about this situation and offers emotional relief from such anxiety through its excessively emotional viewing experience. Ultimately, though melodrama acknowledges the unappealing social realities of its aging audience, the only escape that it offers is a fantastic one.

It is no coincidence that the drop-off in the popularity of melodrama as a formal Hollywood genre coincides with the rise of camp in American popular culture. On the production side, as we have seen, though Hollywood made various attempts to attract older audiences throughout the 1950s, such strategies were largely abandoned in the 1960s, with adult films and melodramas a large part of this jettisoned stock. This was in large part due to the continued decline of the studios, usurped at the box office by independent producers and distributors. Focus on the youth audience became a primary focus in Hollywood as the Baby Boomers came fully of age as a cultural and economic force. Melodrama largely disappeared from the silver screen, though it continued on in the ever-popular soap opera formats (beginning in radio and carrying on to thrive in television), and, later, in movie-of-the-week and made-for-television movie formats.

On the cultural side, the Baby Boomer generation during this period is often presented as one for which irony is a much-prized sensibility. Melodrama, with its excesses of emotion and sentimentality, its calls on the audience for sympathy and empathy, and its reverence for social order, rapidly read as outdated, old-fashioned in an

age of mass camp and irony. Yet, as Tom Schatz points out above, and numerous scholars have argued in retrospect, melodrama, under the cover of its strict genre conventions, worked to question the status quo, an activity that would become a central tenant of a large portion of Baby Boomer culture in the 1960s. As melodrama faded from the silver screen during the early 1960s, it took with it the unique space and audience it offered for the aging female star. While many stars who had found a home in this genre made the move to television, theater, or outright retirement, there is a substantial and important migration of aging female stars into another genre: horror.

Horror

Traditionally focused on fantastical (and male) creatures, such as vampires, mummies, or werewolves, the horror genre shifted in focus following the surprising box office success of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* in 1960. Many of the horror films that follow in the wake of *Psycho* demonstrate a notable deviation from fantastical monsters, focusing instead on horrific "normal" people; people driven, by various traumatic experiences and quirks of psychology, to become psychotic and deranged. As Robin Wood writes about the genre, "One might say that the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses: its re-emergence dramatized as in our nightmares, as an object of horror, a matter for terror, the 'happy ending; (when it exists) typically signifying the restoration of repression."¹⁷⁶ If one considers this shift in the genre's monsters as reflective of a shift in that culture's

¹⁷⁶ Robin Wood. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film" in *Movies and Methods: Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 201.

horrors in need of repression, one can see some interesting issues at play, particularly in the series of films featuring aging women that becomes its own prominent subgenre throughout the decade.

Following the popularity of *Psycho* in 1960 and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962), a crucial film to this study that will be examined in depth shortly, come a series of pictures featuring older actresses in grotesque roles, what some horror enthusiasts have dubbed “Psycho Biddy” films and what Peter Shelley christens the “Grande Dame Guignol” subgenre of horror in his survey of these pictures. Though Shelley’s book provides a useful catalog of the subgenre, his analysis remains largely descriptive, though in these descriptions, he points toward important issues of anxiety central to these films. In describing the character of the grand dame/psycho biddy, he writes:

The grande dame as unstable antagonist may pine for lost youth and glory, or she may be trapped by idealized memories of childhood, with a trauma that haunts her past. She is akin to Miss Havisham in Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, her adult life wasted as she rots away in her unused wedding dress in her room. Like a ghost, the grande dame cannot rest until the unbalance of the universe is corrected. A refusal to accept reality and the natural process of life exemplifies the fear of aging and death, and implicitly a fear of women.¹⁷⁷

Beyond a general anxiety toward women, a perennial undercurrent of the horror genre throughout its history, these films reveal anxieties specific to the culture of the period and its shifting social environment. These films, along with other post-*Psycho* horror pictures, are in keeping with the postwar era’s fascination with psychology and Freudian analysis, putting less emphasis on the notion of external monsters (be they aliens, werewolves, or

¹⁷⁷ Peter Shelley. *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009), 8.

communists) and more on the ways in which modern society has produced members who are themselves monsters of a different sort. The increased emphasis on the dangerous, easily corrupted or damaged individual psyche reveals discomfort with the contemporary world and its increasingly isolated society. The post-*Baby Jane* trend of psycho biddy pictures literalize those fears in the body of the aging woman. There is horror in her isolation, horror in the fact that she is allowed to operate in twisted fashion without outside intervention, and, most of all, horror in her transgression of generational roles. These characters embody anxiety about the roles society is dictating to older women and the horror comes about when these women rise up in defiance of those roles. In keeping with Robin Wood's summation of the horror film as a genre, by the end of each film, these women must be subdued into submission. Additionally, reinforced by their sheer number during the 1960s, these films play an important role in degrading the representation of elder figures, particularly once sexually desirable aging female stars, gradually transforming them into dehumanized objects of kitsch.

To understand these films within a historical context, we can also see that they are part of the lineage of this study, directly linked to films discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2. Shelley points to Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace* and Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* as precursors to this subgenre. *Arsenic* is different, however, in the fact that it is a farce and, as such, diluted by comedy. *Sunset Boulevard*, with its more overtly gothic elements and ghoulish presentation of Swanson and her mansion, is a more direct forerunner to the psycho biddy films of the 1960s, though it is operating within the melodrama/adult drama genre rather than horror. In this sense, it fits into the same group

of adult films released in the early 1950s about fading female stars, including *All About Eve*, *The Star*, and *Forever Female*. These films also present aging women struggling against the redefinition of their place in society, but this is not presented as a malevolent defiance; at worst it is pitiable and at best, relatable. Though *Sunset Boulevard* is the least empathetic of these representations, it is a far cry from the outright hostile representations of the psycho biddy horror cycle.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? is worth examining in some detail for its audacity in the treatment of its star, Bette Davis, as well as for the fact that it creates the mold in which the subsequent psycho biddy pictures are cast. The plot revolves around the later lives of two sisters, one a former child star in vaudeville, Jane (Davis), the other a former star of 1930s Hollywood, Blanche (Crawford). Blanche's career was cut short, however, after Jane hit her with an automobile in a jealous, drunken rage, putting her in a wheelchair for the remainder of her days. Following this backstory, the main plot of the film picks up in the present-day 1960s where the sisters share a home and where Blanche, confined to an upstairs bedroom, has been dependent upon Jane and a part-time housekeeper for all food, care, and contact with the outside world. Jane, who has long been obsessed with her childhood fame and lost in her past, has been becoming increasingly unstable; as a consequence, Blanche has put a plan in motion to sell their long-time home, have her sister institutionalized, and move to a smaller home with the housekeeper. Jane, however, has caught wind of the situation and becomes motivated to rekindle her childhood act in order to have personal and economic independence from her sister and avoid institutionalization. In her pursuit of this, Jane hires a younger man to be

her musical accompanist. Desperate for the money, the man ignores the obvious delusions of Jane and her awkward sexual advances and encourages her incongruous performances of childish songs in little girl costumes. At the same time that she pursues her attempts to rekindle her childhood fame, Jane works to keep Blanche unaware of the situation, cutting off her communication with the outside world by intercepting her mail, removing the phone lines in Blanche's bedroom, and firing the housekeeper. As the film progresses, Jane's treatment of Blanche becomes increasingly more villainous—she kills Blanche's pet bird and then serves it to her for dinner, bringing her nothing else for days until she then offers up a cooked rat as an alternative, leaving Blanche in a weakened, starved, and terrified state. Jane also fends off others who attempt to inquire about Blanche's wellbeing, impersonating Blanche on the telephone to her doctor and accountant, lying to the neighbors to throw them off and, finally, murdering the housekeeper who threatens to call in the police. Eventually, the young accompanist alerts the police and Jane kidnaps Blanche and goes on the run. A short time later, the two are found on a public beach and the film ends with the police rescuing Blanche while Jane, pleased to have an audience, performs her childhood routine for a group of gawking teenage beachgoers before, presumably, being arrested and institutionalized.

In Jane and Blanche, we see the two main characterizations of older women that will be repeated throughout the various copycat films that follow and, by default, become some of the predominant representations of elder figures on the big screen (and, in reruns, on the small screen thereafter) during the 1960s. In Blanche, as Sally Chivers has pointed out in her analysis of the film, we initially see a representation of the proper aging

woman in that she is pleasant and grateful for the assistance she receives though she asks relatively little, instead keeping to her room apart from the rest of the world.¹⁷⁸ She is seen reminiscing about the past without trying to relive it or be her younger self. Above all, she is passive. This is, of course, complicated by the late plot revelation that Blanche herself caused her own paralyzing accident and later blamed it on her already mentally unstable sister, thus undermining her representation in the story as a paragon of proper aging woman and proper aging star. Throughout the majority of the film, though, Crawford plays the aging woman as a figure of ultimate vulnerability, dependent upon the kindness and intervention of other, younger people, and in constant danger through her physical limitations, isolation, and status as someone easily forgotten about by the larger community. This vulnerable elder representation appears periodically throughout the copycat films that followed *Baby Jane*'s success.

Jane, by contrast, is the true “psycho biddy”; psychotic, unpredictable, a nightmare vision of a woman refusing to pass quietly into proper performance of old age. Davis's make-up in the film, in contrast to the restrained natural look of Crawford or the aged but still glamorous look of Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, is heavy and distorting. The make-up exaggerates the age of Davis's face, creating deep wrinkles and shadows, resulting in a grotesque, melted mask-like visage. Davis's costuming, on the other hand, emphasizes the horror of her age through incongruity, growing progressively more juvenile as the film wears on, relying on the uncanny absurdity of a grown woman, let alone an elder woman with the face of a monster, in a little girl's pinafore and hair bows.

¹⁷⁸ Chivers (2011).

Davis's character personifies what Chivers, borrowing a concept from Mary Russo, refers to as the "scandal of anachronism," the disruption caused when a member of society plays a role socially assigned to a different (usually younger) age group.¹⁷⁹ In *Jane*, this scandal is not merely a faux pas or cause for pity—rather, it is an outright threatening transgression. Jane is physically and sexually aggressive, sarcastic and cruel, alcoholic, violent, mentally unstable and overcome with rages of childish jealousy. Without effective intervention, she operates as a self-destructive danger to herself and those around her.

By the end of the film, however, Jane, having fled the private confines of the mansion, is rendered much less powerful. The threat of her anachronism is lessened in the public space and, confronted by figures of authority (the police), as well as the mass gawking of the teenage beachgoers, she is rendered powerless and pitiable. This also emphasizes a last key element of the psycho biddy films: overt generational tension. Often this is expressed in a psychotic older woman's attack on a younger protagonist; even in *Psycho*, Norman Bates inhabits the role of the older woman who tormented him psychologically and uses this role to attack beautiful young woman. *Baby Jane* may be most famous for its biddy-on-biddy violence, especially featuring two well-known Hollywood rivals, but lesser plots points involve Jane's aggression toward the younger maid and the young mother and daughter next door, as well as the repressed horror of the accompanist toward her advances. In the closed-off and unnatural world of her home,

¹⁷⁹ See Chivers (2011), 40-41. See also, Mary Russo. "Aging and the Scandal of Anachronism," in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-33.

Jane rules with frightening power and horrific anachronism; in the public space, dominated by order and, more importantly, youth, however, she is returned to her “proper” social place as a pitiable and, crucially, mockable, elder.

Following *Baby Jane*, a number of copycat films employing aging stars in similar roles are released, consolidating the psycho biddy as a popular trope, and providing steady representation of elder figures presented as inhuman, threatening, and laughable. Davis and Crawford both appear in a number of such films. These include *Dead Ringer* (Paul Henried, 1964) in which Margaret (Bette Davis) kills her widowed identical twin sister, takes over her identity and wealthy lifestyle then is sent to prison after evidence arises that Margaret’s sister actually murdered her late husband in order to be with her younger lover. *Straight-Jacket* (William Castle, 1964) features Joan Crawford as Lucy, a woman who had been institutionalized after murdering her husband and his mistress with an ax but has now returned home to her young adult daughter. A series of ax murders are at first pinned on the unstable Lucy but are eventually revealed to be the work of her daughter, who, in a *Psycho*-esque twist, has been driven insane by her mother and begun committing the ax murders while wearing a wig and clothing reminiscent of her mother. The daughter is then institutionalized and Lucy, in order to take care of her, has herself admitted to the same institution. *Hush...Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (Robert Aldrich, 1964) again casts Bette Davis as an unstable recluse and again sets her against a same-generation rival, played by Olivia deHavilland. Davis and deHavilland duke it out with a series of depraved acts, ultimately ending with Davis’s murder of deHavilland and subsequent institutionalization. In *I Saw What You Did* (William Castle, 1965), Crawford

does not have the lead villainess role, but she plays the part of a sexually threatening and mentally unstable older woman, attempting to blackmail a younger neighbor into marrying her and being murdered by this neighbor as a result. *The Nanny* (Seth Holt, 1965) features Davis as a nanny beloved by her employers despite their young daughter having drowned under her care. Nanny is not beloved, however, by her other young charge who was blamed for his sister's death despite his insistence that Nanny was responsible. The child is pitted against Nanny through a series of increasingly terrifying events until eventually Nanny is caught attempting to drown him as well. In *Berserk!* (Jim O'Connolly, 1968) Joan Crawford is Monica, the owner and ringleader of a circus where a series of performers have died during their acts in elaborate fashion. Monica is suspected to be behind the deaths, which have resulted in excellent ticket sales and packed shows. When Monica partners up in romance and business with a much younger man, the man's jealous former lover murders him and attempts to murder Monica as well. The younger rival is struck dead by lightning and, surprisingly, Monica survives to continue on as head of the circus, though the problematic relationship with the younger man, perhaps more threatening even than her potential status as a serial killer, has been eliminated.

In all of these films, the older woman is continuously presented as problematic in her unwillingness to obediently adhere to her prescribed social role. With the exception of *Berserk!*, the films are uniformly resolved by killing off the problematic aging women or handing them off to an institution where they can be safely kept away from society and presumably warehoused until death.

Other aging actresses also star throughout the decade in a number of films that fit within this subgenre including Olivia deHavilland (*Lady in a Cage*, 1964), Tallulah Bankhead (*Die! Die! My Darling!*, 1965), Barbara Stanwyck (*The Night Walker*, 1965), Joan Fontaine (*The Devil's Own*, 1966), Miriam Hopkins (*Savage Intruder*, 1968), and Ruth Gordon (*Whatever Happened to Aunt Alice?*, 1969) . With the exception of Bankhead in *Die! Die! My Darling!*, these actresses' roles are not that of terrorizer, but that of victim, more akin to Crawford in *Baby Jane* than Davis. In these roles, the woman is often isolated and vulnerable, subject to the whims of dangerous, unstable younger people. If the Crawford, Davis, and Bankhead portrayals of the "psycho biddy" represent the horror of the older woman unwilling to accept her changing role in society, these victim roles appear to take on the anxieties of isolation and vulnerability expressed in the aging women melodramas and, within the new genre context, literalize their horror.

Linda Williams argues that the body genres, horror in this case, are essential to our conception of the relationship between the audience and representation on screen in part because of the way those representations elicit physical response in the viewer. She posits that with horror film, it is not just the scream, but also the shudder that are involuntary physical responses prompted in the viewer, revealing a physiological and emotional connection between the viewer and bodies and faces onscreen. That these films are constantly presenting characters marked physically and psychologically by "age" and presenting them within a generic context that, as Williams argues, encourages intense moments of viewer identification, is important in considering how representation can effect how a culture becomes trained to respond to certain "types," in this case, those

marked as elder figures. Chivers, too, in her analysis, points to the importance of the way these films represent aging to the audience. She writes:

Because so many members of the audience imagine aging inscribed on their own bodies, a sense of troubling horror emerges from the disjunction between what they had learned to expect from these starlets and the realization of the stars' aging psychical forms as per the frightening logic: if even Hollywood stars age, then so too must we (*memento obsolesci*, as it were). This horror then ironically allows the audience members to distance themselves from the process.¹⁸⁰

On how this distancing operates, she adds:

Collectively [these films] try to make aging femininity out to be so frightening that it is almost not to be feared. That is, by exaggerating the characters' self-delusions the films encourage audience members to think that just as they could never be quite as beautiful as the young Crawford, Davis, or Swanson, so too their old age could never be quite so horrifying.¹⁸¹

In other words, the performances and characterizations within these films are so over-the-top as to render the "biddies" less than recognizably "real," so removed from the reality of lived life as to be something less than human. The psycho biddy cycle of films render the aging women at their core as monstrously "othered" objects.

I argue that, not only does this distancing take place, but that its dehumanizing and objectifying of the elder figure works to set the stage for elder kitsch. To understand this connection it is crucial to consider the cross-genre space that the psycho biddy films occupy. These films borrow actresses and narratives from the 1950s melodrama, put them into a horror context, with the resulting combination easily read as camp. Particularly during this historic moment, so dominated by youth culture and attitudes, irony and skepticism directed toward "anyone over thirty," this enjoyment of older stars within a

¹⁸⁰ Chivers (2011), 43.

¹⁸¹ Chivers (2011), 57.

camp context is quite different from the straight-forward entertainment, gravitas, or nostalgia such stars were invited to offer through their performances, especially on television, in the 1950s. *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* can be seen as a meeting point between melodrama, horror, and comedy, a vital moment when the audience is presented with the tragedy and the horror of being “old” in postwar America but learns to deflect it with laughter.

Comedy, Camp, and Kitsch

In her essay, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” Linda Williams purposefully excludes comedy from the “body genres” as she sees them. She dismisses comedy on the grounds of what amounts to a technicality, noting, “The reactions of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown.”¹⁸² This distinction becomes irrelevant as Williams writes further about her chosen genres (melodrama, horror, pornography), acknowledging that the films may prompt bodily reaction of tears, shudders, or orgasm despite the lack of a visual representation of such bodily sensation mirrored in perfect simultaneity onscreen. Williams decision to avoid discussion of comedy as a body genre is understandable in light of the greater argument her essay pursues, revolving around the manipulation of the female body onscreen in order to prompt an ecstatic, bodily reaction in the viewer. The female body has largely been absent in American film comedy, which has traditionally been dominated by the male body, from Charles Chaplin to Jim Carey, with only periodic exceptions like Lucille

¹⁸² Williams (2000), 210.

Ball or, most recently, Melissa McCarthy. In this sense, the genre does not lend itself well to an argument about the exploitation of the female body, beyond one of simple exclusion. As I have argued, however, Williams's ideas about the connection between bodies onscreen and bodily reaction in the viewer are useful beyond the specific consideration of the female body. The ways that bodies are used as objects onscreen to provoke calculated audience reaction are important, particularly in the case of elder kitsch. Applying Williams's ideas about "excessive" bodily displays onscreen prompting reactions of bodily release in the audience reveal much in a consideration of aging bodies as objects of kitsch provoke a laughter response that will become familiar through constant repetition over the following decades.

In the first portion of this chapter, I considered the role that melodrama played in presenting the aging woman as a body learning to be apart from the society she has known, provoking tears through the excessive tragedy of her situation. I then examined the exploitative use of the aging woman as the psycho biddy within the context of the horror film, provoking terror in her refusal to adhere to the proper social place of the aging woman and laughter in her excessive fight against this. In this last section, I want to reflect on a few cases in which older stars were used in teen-oriented broad comedies and to consider this within the mass camp context that flourishes in comedy and advertising aimed at youth audiences from the 1960s onward.

The concept of camp has long been a contentious subject of debate and the definition of the term has varied as its use value has changed, therefore I wish to clarify the way in which I employ the term before moving on with this analysis. The way in

which I am using the term throughout this chapter is in reference to what Barbara Klinger terms “mass camp” or Moe Meyer terms “pop camp.”¹⁸³ That is, camp in its broadest, most mainstream sense, what Klinger describes as “a type of response facilitated by developments in mass culture, and more widely available to the middle class than its more marginalized relatives.”¹⁸⁴ This is the camp that sixties cultural critics like Susan Sontag were fascinated by, arguing that it was a defining feature of young, Baby Boomer aesthetic and comedic sensibility.¹⁸⁵ As Andrew Ross writes, camp “more than anything else, shaped, defined, and negotiated the way in which intellectuals of the sixties tried to “pass” as newly enlightened subscribers to the Pop aesthetic in the attractive throwaway world of immediacy created by the mass culture industries.”¹⁸⁶ Such films feature a kind of hip, self-aware comedy that embraced exaggerated performances and plot contrivances, producing broad, intentionally silly comedy. It is this mass/pop camp, in its largely depoliticized employment, to which I refer.

While aging female stars like Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Olivia deHavilland were moving from the respectable realms of the adult film and melodrama in the 1950s into the realm of ageexploitation with the psycho biddy horror cycle of the 1960s, a handful of older male stars were also part of a peculiar generic migration during this period. These stars, including Vincent Price, Boris Karloff, and Peter Lorre, had, during

¹⁸³ Moe Meyer. “Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp” in *Queer Cinema: The Film Reader*, eds. Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 138.

¹⁸⁴ Klinger (1994), 137.

¹⁸⁵ Susan Sontag. “Notes on Camp,” in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966/2001), 275-292.

¹⁸⁶ Andrew Ross. “Uses of Camp” in *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*, ed. David Bergman (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 55.

the golden era of the studio system, been mostly associated with their star turns in horror films. In the mid-1960s, however, Price, Karloff, and Lorre had become familiar faces to teen audiences through their numerous appearances in campy teen comedies produced by American International Pictures, more commonly referred to as AIP.

AIP was formed during the period of upheaval in Hollywood following the Paramount decision in 1947. Like many other independent outfits, AIP took advantage of newly opened exhibition opportunities to distribute independently produced, low-budget films aimed at a teen market. Initially focusing on exploitation fare, like *The Fast and the Furious* (1955) and *Girls in Prison* (1956), AIP worked closely with exhibitors and teenage focus groups, determining what stars, titles, and scenarios were most popular then planning upcoming productions based on this information.¹⁸⁷ In this fashion, AIP became a reliable B-movie distributor, regularly releasing films exploiting teen interest in juvenile delinquency, hot rod racing, and rock and roll, as well as a number of horror pictures featuring traditional monsters placed into a teen-friendly setting, such as *I Was a Teenage Werewolf* (1957) and *I Was a Teenage Frankenstein* (1957).

In the early 1960s, AIP released a series of horror films based on the work of Edgar Allen Poe directed by Roger Corman and starring Vincent Price. Intended to compete with the popular British Hammer horror films, *The House of Usher* (Roger Corman, 1960) is notably more sober than other AIP horror pictures, like *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (Bernard L. Kowalski, 1959), using Price's earlier stardom as a marker of legitimacy. Following the success of *The House of Usher*, AIP released six more

¹⁸⁷ Thomas Doherty. *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), 153-54.

Corman-Price films between 1961 and 1965. Applying the same formula, other available actors from Price's golden era cohort, including Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, Lon Chaney Jr., and Basil Rathbone, were cast in these subsequent films as well. Although the Poe pictures start off as straight horror films, they gradually become more campy and farcical, culminating in the release of a parody of the series, *The Comedy of Terrors* (Jacques Tourneur, 1963) starring Price, Lorre, Karloff, Rathbone, and Joe E. Brown. Just as female stars who would never have been in horror films in their heyday are presented during this later period as something scary (or at least, horrifying), male stars who would have been previously associated with being scary are now funny. Both cases demonstrate the use of older stars' previous fame to add legitimacy to cheap films but, more importantly, the status of these aging stars is undermined, setting them up as something to be laughed at.

This shifting of older actors into roles that acknowledged their previous stardom by making fun of those personas, positioning them as incongruously absurd in a "knowing," contemporary context, is representative of AIP's entry into broad, campy comedy with the "Beach Party" films, beginning with *Beach Party* (William Asher, 1963). *Beach Party*, the first in what would become another successful series for AIP, features teen stars of music and television Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello, parties on the beach, cross-promotional musical performances, and, oddly, a cameo by Vincent Price. The beach party pictures that AIP released frequently over the next several years are notable for their self-aware and consciously campy approach. While they may have begun as an attempt to cash in on the then-popular *Gidget* films, focusing on a teen girl

surfer and her fellow California beach teen friends, the beach party films drop the father-daughter relationship at the heart of the Gidget pictures and the accompanying sentimentality. The beach party films are flip and over-the-top, trading in wholesome athletic teens for buxom bikini girls and centering around farcical plots featuring mad scientists, motorcycle gangs, and mermaids.

The biggest difference between the beach party pictures and the Gidget films, though, is the wholesale removal of parental presence. The teenagers of the beach party films exist in a world devoid of the complications and limitations provided by parents and the school environment, a world of endless summer populated by teenagers in beachwear and teen musical performers like Little Richard, Leslie Gore, and “Little Stevie Wonder.” Into this teen world pop occasional non-teen stars like Paul Lynde or Don Rickles and, like Price, older stars of the teens’ grandparents’ generation. Lorre, Karloff, and Rathbone make frequent appearances, as well as Elsa Lanchester, Dorothy Lamour, Francis X. Bushman, and Buster Keaton. These older figures do not act as a parental presence at all, appearing fully a part of this teen-centric world of beach parties and shake shacks. Neither are they grandparent-like; rather, they perform as simplified, one-note versions of the previous star personas, kitsch objects for the amusement of the kids.

The presentation of older stars in this context is quite different from the reverent, nostalgic context of *This is Your Life* and other television guest star contexts, as discussed in Chapter 3. The stars are still clearly presented as anachronistic, relics from an older period, but within the campy, comedic context of the beach party films, they are not presented as people whose longevity and ties to another era are to be appreciated,

however brief the television appearance. In these instances, it is all about the anachronism and its ridiculous incongruity. Keaton, for example, is still operating very much in his familiar star character, performing mostly silent slapstick humor and pratfalls, but he is consistently placed opposite bikini-clad young women (most often actress Bobbi Shaw). This juxtaposition underscores Keaton's visible age and rewrites his performance as a dirty old man. The other older stars' performances are similarly rewritten through recontextualization, though Keaton's mostly silent, physically comedic appearances are the closest to what we would now recognize as contemporary elder kitsch, bearing uncanny resemblance to many modern advertisements that employ the elder kitsch trope.

Though AIP presents perhaps the most interesting collection of these aging star cameos in youth-oriented pictures, including about two dozen films between 1960 and 1966, this trend was not entirely limited to the slap-dash AIP youthsplotation pictures. Director Richard Lester, whose work with comedian Peter Sellers and The Beatles, made him hip among babyboomer tastemakers, featured aged British actor Wilfrid Brambell in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), as Paul McCartney's fictional grandfather, a "clean old man" (as opposed to a "dirty old man") who travels and hangs out with The Beatles, provoking mischief. Lester also cast older comedians Phil Silvers and Buster Keaton in the musical farce, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966) with Keaton performing his usual incongruous physical comedy and Silvers singing the praises (literally) of surrounding oneself in old age with beautiful young women.

On television too, the guest star space that had been a steady source of employment for older stars began to reflect a more frequently campy context for such appearances. 1930s sex symbol Mae West, for example, made a series of television appearances in the 1960s playing herself, a version of her former highly sexualized star persona now laughable in the contemporary context. And, offering a camp aesthetic to a presumably even younger crowd, the television series *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968) regularly cast aged guest stars to “ham it up” within its excessive, cartoonish world, including Vincent Price, Francis X. Bushman, Milton Berle, Tallulah Bankhead, Rudy Vallee, Ethel Merman, Edward Everett Horton, Reginald Denny, and Spring Byington. Over the course of the 1960s, through films, television, and advertising, we can see a consistent normalization of the trope of using older stars as objects of kitsch in campy product pitched to teens and young adult audiences.

To return to this chapter’s focus on generic negotiation of cultural anxieties, we can first consider, broadly, the function of comedy within culture and society. For many considering comedy from a theoretical standpoint, Henri Bergson’s and Sigmund Freud’s notions about the social function of laughter continue to be foundational.¹⁸⁸ For Bergson, laughter is an involuntary bodily response when the mind perceives something to be out of balance from the natural order of things, be this a man tripping and falling, thus interrupting the natural movement of his walking, or a person behaving in a way inappropriate to their social position, thus interfering with the order of society. Thus, laughter issues as a corrective, of sorts, notifying ourselves, and those around us, that

¹⁸⁸ Henri Bergson. *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan and Company, 1913).

something is amiss and in need of readjustment or attention. Accepting Bergson's ideas, it is easy to see in a very basic sense why the incongruity of elder figures on display in the psycho biddy pictures or the beach party films provoke laughter—elder figures are behaving inappropriate to their socially assigned station, thus we laugh in response to their incongruous behavior.

For Freud, comedy very much relates to the balance of society as well, though in his view, it is representative of the individual's contradictory yearnings to be both a part of acceptable society and apart from it, expressing his or her socially unacceptable thoughts and desires. Freud views comedy as what occurs when thoughts normally suppressed because of their social unacceptability become expressed. Laughter, then, is the (id) response of pleasure in seeing the normally repressed expressed.¹⁸⁹ These ideas by Bergson and Freud can help to illuminate the essentials of how comedy operates on an individual and social level, but to consider how comedy is significant to the audience in these particular instances, it is useful to return to Williams. For Williams, the attraction of audiences to body genre films is due in large part to the way such films encourage pleasurable bodily experiences that are normally unacceptable socially. Be these weeping, screaming, or, in the case of pornography, orgasm, that offer the audience member a satisfying sense of release and relief. In this sense, I argue that comedy too operates as a body genre, offering the release of laughter. Thus comedy is built upon the recognition of social aberration or absurdity, and laughter offers a release, however

¹⁸⁹ Sigmund Freud. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1960).

fleeting, from the pressures of social conformity and the pressures of not acknowledging social incongruities.

When discussing the body and comedy as well as the audience and society, however, Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of comedy as an equalizing force should also be considered. For Bakhtin, humor, particularly humor involving the body and sexuality, works to break down barriers between the low and the high in society, reminding the spectator of all human beings' shared fate as organic mortals.¹⁹⁰ In this sense, the comedy of elder figures cavorting with teenagers can be seen as erasing the boundaries of generation, yet notably not the more pressing boundaries between teen and parental generation. The use of older stars in these "lower" contexts can also be seen as undermining their previous status, positioning them as level to (or even subordinate to, in the eyes of the presumed audience of the period) a teen star like Frankie Avalon, bringing the matter of such films' camp context to the forefront.

Camp, too, operates in many ways as an equalizing force, working to undercut the powerful, be this powerful people or powerful social dictates. Camp exaggerates the most easily identifiable aspects of people, resulting in performances and representations that are nothing if not excessive. Such excessive representations draw attention to the absurdity of personal affectations, behaviors, and social roles, in the process undermining the social structures that lend them power. With the power of perceived social status and public performance of self thus weakened, all players are placed on an even field of

¹⁹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

acknowledged absurdity. Social status and adherence to prescribed social roles become negligible in the wholly excessive world of camp and so, too, other usually limiting factors like linearity or temporality. One particular aspect of camp especially relevant to the examples examined in this chapter is camp's exuberant repurposing of the old and outmoded, the detritus of popular culture. As Andrew Ross writes:

The camp effect, then, is created not simply by a change in the mode of cultural production (and the contradictions attendant on that change), but rather when the products (stars, in this case) of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to produce dominant cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste.¹⁹¹

The casting of older stars in roles like those of the beach party films and *Batman* demonstrate not only the equalizing effect of camp, a negation of the boundaries erected by generation and stardom, but also the undermining of studio era Hollywood cultural dominance through the repurposing of discarded stars in irreverent fashion. Buster Keaton is rewritten as a dirty old man, Tallulah Bankhead rewritten as a lascivious old lady, and the age and outmoded personas of a number of other stars become the consistent source of comedy. The old are repurposed for the amusement of the young.

Yet there is also a flattening effect in these repurposings. Stars like Lorre, Keaton, and Bankhead, performing variations of their previous star personas in these new contexts are oddities to be sure, but they are also performing among many other oddities presented for amusement. When everything—settings, plot contrivances, performances—is amplified and exaggerated to maximize absurdity, things take on a highly artificial quality. Characters cease being representations of people and instead become

¹⁹¹ Ross (1993), 58.

representations of types, older stars included. In serving the function of “amusingly outmoded star” or “funny old man/lady,” these stars begin to function as objects, symbols of quaint irrelevancy, with their marking of “oldness” serving as shorthand for “funny.” The use of older stars in the camp comedic context of the 1960s demonstrate one final way of deflecting anxieties about aging: dehumanizing the aged onscreen by transforming them into two-dimensional objects of kitsch to be laughed at.

Comedy, at its most essential, deals with power. It serves as a means for diminishing the power of things that threaten in some fashion. By dehumanizing the aging figures onscreen, as elder kitsch does, they become not people, but symbols of age and its inevitable endpoint: death. Elder kitsch works to remove the person and the personal and to create something two-dimensional and easily mocked. It becomes okay to laugh at the old man because he is not a man like anyone we know, rather he is an “old man” performing incongruously youthful acts. Bergson argued that this kind of distanciation is necessary for comedy—seeing a man trip and fall to whom one feels an empathetic connection (if the man is, say, one’s ailing father) does not produce comedy and a laughter response. As he writes, “Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion.”¹⁹² This indifference and removal of emotional association are also key to understanding this comedic trope as kitsch. Kitsch is dependent upon familiarity in order to provoke its intended emotional response and in this case, there is a growing familiarity with the representation that old people, outside of their natural context, equal “funny.” Theodor Adorno argued that kitsch is “the beautiful

¹⁹² Bergson (1913), 4.

minus its ugly counterpart,” thus encouraging an immediate emotional response and discouraging any further consideration.¹⁹³ In this sense, I argue that elder kitsch presents a vision of old people with the troubling bits removed.

Ultimately, in this last chapter, I have attempted to piece together a narrative of the degradation of the older body onscreen in Hollywood during the 1960s, a process facilitated by the genres that offered performance space (and paychecks) to aging stars. These genres, and their “low” associations with excess allow for excessive performances in numerous, indistinguishable roles and films, a hallmark of the familiarity genre pictures offer in Hollywood. This repetition reinforces such unreal, excessive presentations as normal. This all coincides with changes in cultural sensibilities and aesthetics as baby boomer youth culture comes to dominate popular culture in the 1960s. We can see this in the shift away from the very generically formulated melodramas of the 1950s with their sympathetic aging heroines. The excess in these films (related to plot, mise-en-scene, and performance style) encourage intense empathy with the aging woman, theoretically provoking a bodily response of sorrow from the audience member. Though many of the same elements of these 1950s melodramas (the plight of the aging woman, her lack of options and entrapment by the society around her due in large part to her age, anxieties about isolation and vulnerability, excessive plot contrivances, excessive performance style) are transplanted into the psycho biddy horror pictures of the 1960s, the result is quite different. Such pictures use these same elements to provoke a response of repulsion, horror, scorn, or even laughter.

¹⁹³ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993), 37.

With broad, campy comedies in the same period, all pretense of sympathy and empathy are gone; these excessive performances in excessive plots in excessive onscreen worlds read as wholly unreal and wholly kitsch, provoking a response of laughter at incongruity and nothing else. They mark a turning point, not only when elder kitsch becomes crystalized as a popular comedic trope but also a point at which such representations are so drained of negative associations that they operate simply as kitsch, to be laughed at, without prompting further examination.

As this chapter draws to a close, it seems appropriate to look at one more film, released not long after the films I have just been discussing. *Harold and Maude* (Hal Ashby, 1971) is one of the best-known filmic representations of elder kitsch. In many ways, it fits the pattern of the AIP comedies of the 1960s. It is squarely pitched to a youth audience of the period, with its young protagonist Harold (Bud Cort), soundtrack by folk musician Cat Stevens, and strong anti-authority (often anti-adult) messages throughout. Within this youth-centric context Ruth Gordon portrays, Maude, an utterly hip and carefree seventy-nine-year old woman who captures Harold's imagination and romantic interest by being more worldly, fun, and progressive than any of the stuffy adults or square young people that surround him. The majority of Gordon's time on screen is spent emphasizing for comedic purpose the ways in which Maude behaves like a counterculture youth. She is shown posing in the nude for a bohemian artist friend, stealing and riding a motorcycle, snubbing the authority of multiple police officers and priests, planting trees in acts of guerilla eco-activism, expressing anti-war sentiments, and experimenting with mind-altering substances. All of this is surrounded by very broad moments of comedy,

most notably Harold's fake suicide performances, as well as the campy characterizations of most other figures in the film, including Harold's snobby mother, military-obsessed uncle, and air-headed potential age-appropriate dates.

Elder kitsch was used as a selling point to market the film, if one looks to the two original trailers for its release. In one, a series of scenes from the film are presented while the Cat Stevens-penned theme song, "If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out" plays. The scenes shown in this trailer are almost exclusively of Gordon participating in youthful, often rebellious activities. Harold is minimized and very little sense of plot is given. Clearly, the elder kitsch antics of Maude and the prominent advertisement for Stevens's participation are the major selling points on offer. In a second original trailer, much more of the plot is presented, but the focus is still on the outrageousness of Maude's elder kitsch antics, specifically her romantic relationship with Cort. In addition to many of the scenes presented in the first trailer (of Maude dancing, riding a motorcycle, posing nude), there are also clips of Maude spouting anti-war and anti-establishment sentiments, as well as a scene of Maude and Harold kissing and groping each other, which is placed prominently in the early portion of the trailer and then shown again at its end. All of this is scored to upbeat, marching band music, emphasizing the film's irreverence. Again, the key selling point of the film appears to be the outrageousness of Maude's youthful behavior and the shock value of the relationship between a young man and a woman of his grandparents' generation.

The most conspicuous image from the second trailer—Maude's and Harold's make-out scene—also happens to be absent in the final cut of the film itself. Though the

romantic relationship between the two main characters remains, its physical manifestation is significantly toned down in the film itself, limited to one scene in which the two characters are shown unclothed in bed, implying a post-coital moment but not stating so overtly. This disconnect between the advertisement for the film and its actual content is indicative of the way in which *Harold and Maude* uses the elder kitsch trope to perform a kind of bait and switch. While Maude is sold in the trailers (and presented in the early portions of the film) as a wacky object of elder kitsch, her character is allowed, as the film goes on, to become more than just a joke. She is shown to have multiple and varied talents, and there are glimpses into a personal history appropriate to a woman of her generation, most notably a wrist tattoo, shown briefly, that implies that she is a concentration camp survivor. In short, the film allows this elder kitsch character to be seen as human. And, through the eyes of protagonist Harold, who steadily becomes more taken with Maude as the film progresses, she comes to be represented as someone fascinating beyond mere oddity; she is wise and interesting with valuable talents and thoughts. All camp and kitsch elements are dropped in the film's final sequence, in which it is revealed that Maude has taken control of her own mortality by choosing to commit suicide. Harold initially fights this decision, but ultimately Maude's wishes are seen through. The film ends on an upbeat note with Harold abandoning his obsession with death and moving on to embrace life, following the manner modeled by Maude.

In this way, *Harold and Maude* is a case in which elder kitsch is certainly used to attract a youthful audience to a film about a seventy-nine-year-old woman, as well as to add additional levity and irreverence to a film that is already teeming in black humor and camp characterization. The film also, however, demonstrates a way in which elder kitsch may be used beyond mere agesploitation. Here elder kitsch does not serve to dehumanize its aged star; rather, elder kitsch attracts an audience but then leads to a more rounded portrayal of an elder figure and opens the door to more thoughtful consideration about age and the roles it plays in our shared culture and individual lives.

Again and again one can see repetition of these patterns established in the media of the postwar years, in which faces from our entertainment past are repurposed into delightfully anachronistic characters whose youthful antics and statements make them into figures apparently immune to the difficulties of aging, figures which, like Ruth Gordon in *Harold and Maude*, defy the looming specter of mortality. In the decades since the examples considered in this chapter, an embrace of elder kitsch, with the momentary vision of immortality it offers, has endured.

Epilogue: Contemporary Elder Kitsch

This project has offered a history of the events (cultural, industrial, historical) and media representations that eventually led to the popularization of the now-familiar comedic trope of elder kitsch. In the first chapter, “I Love the Old Folks at Home: Elder Representation in Hollywood from 1936-1946,” I documented an era in which elder figures were a key concern of social discourse and were, as well, a strong presence in many important pictures of the period, particularly the extremely popular comedies of director Frank Capra. I examined how many of the elder representations of the era are sympathetic, even laudatory, emphasizing the value of elders within the community and the importance of community itself. Through considering the change in reception of Capra’s films, both critically and publically, following the end of World War II, the final portion of the first chapter reveals a culture whose dominant sensibilities and attitudes about family, community, and elders, were very much in flux.

The second chapter of this project, “Adult Films for the Lost Audience of Postwar America,” picked up chronologically where the first chapter left off, examining Hollywood’s relationship with the public in the early postwar years. This chapter presented a history of the “adult” film, a concept rooted in larger cultural generational conflict. By exploring the discourse surrounding the idea of “adult” films, as well as a number of the conflicted representations of aging within these films, this chapter

demonstrated a cultural period of renegotiation surrounding the place and roles of elders. It also illustrated ways in which the film industry, facing challenges brought on by the shifting economics of the early postwar years, as well as the challenges brought about by the changing sensibilities and lifestyles of the American public, used the concept of adult films in attempts to pitch certain product to this changing public.

The third chapter, “Blue Hair and the Blue Glow: The Older Star and Early Television,” continued to examine this generational divide but shifted the medium to television. I argued that older stars who were in many ways “used up” in Hollywood found a new performance space in early television, where they were used to help sell the new medium to a buying public. The reign of these older stars did not last long, however, as television networks eventually found greater profit by appealing to the burgeoning youth market and high-consuming young families. In order to trace this shift, I used Buster Keaton as a case study to demonstrate how older stars (particularly comedic stars) helped to crystalize the trope of elder kitsch on television in the later years of the decade by presenting older stars not as traditional performance subjects but, rather, as objects of nostalgia and amusement.

While older stars had found a place of some importance in the early years of television, they continued on in the cinema not as newly re-appreciated stars, but as almost abject figures. In the fourth and final chapter, “Agesploitation: Genre and the Aging Body,” I surveyed the roles that were still made available to film stars who were largely deemed past their prime. For many of the female stars, this meant being relegated to melodrama and horror. I used theories of body genres and camp aesthetics to note that

these abject figures were often used as cautionary tales and purposefully exploited to celebrate and valorize youth while denigrating or at least laughing at that which is elderly. These dehumanized objects of irony and camp became the templates for how contemporary audiences today view the trope of elder kitsch. I closed the fourth chapter with a brief consideration of the 1971 comedy *Harold and Maude*, a film that employed the elder kitsch trope to an extreme in order to attract a youthful audience. This analysis points out, however, that in fleshing out the character of Maude, the film manages to undermine the kitsch quality of her characterization, allowing for a warmer, more three-dimensional presentation of her as an elder figure, demonstrating that elder kitsch does not always have to function as something dehumanizing or negative.

My overall intention in this history has been to offer a way to understand other instances of elder kitsch as they inevitably pop up in our media following the period this project has outlined. Mae West's foray into releasing rock and roll albums in the late 1960s and early 1970s, for instance, makes sense within the context of the culture industries clamoring to create product aimed at the youth market, Hollywood films and television programs already having found success by repurposing older stars in youth-centric situations, and a youth culture increasingly attuned to an irreverent camp sensibility and its embrace of the detritus of past cultural moments.

The context of what came before helps to make sense of George Burns's successful late-career turn as the quintessential "funny little old man," on TV talk shows, in commercials, and in films like *Oh, God!* (Carl Reiner, 1977), *Going in Style* (Martin Brest, 1979), and *18 Again!* (Paul Flaherty, 1988). Burns's appearance throughout the

late-1970s and 1980s are very much in the vaudeville, hoary, quip-a-minute variety that would not have been uncommon in early television but by this point grow increasingly more anachronistic in the cultural context. Yet this anachronistic incongruity has already found a home in the elder kitsch trope established in the 1960s, and Burns slides easily into this niche. Burns's longtime partner from vaudeville, film, radio, and early television, Gracie Allen, had passed away by this point, of course, which necessitated Burns's transformation of his character from dry straight man to dry, solo joke-teller, and the loosened restrictions of film and television by this point allowed for his jokes to make frequent "blue" innuendo, further adding to the anachronistic appeal of his elder kitsch character.

The drily quipping character that worked so well for Burns is also taken up by Estelle Getty's character on the popular 1980s television sitcom *The Golden Girls* (NBC, 1985-1992). The series about four retired female friends sharing a fashionable home together in Florida, was often praised for presenting four women over fifty as strong and interesting protagonists on primetime television.¹⁹⁴ And yet, among these nuanced (by television sitcom standards) representations of elder women, the show also includes Estelle Getty as a quintessential elder kitsch type. Although a generation older than the other main characters, Getty behaves in a much younger, fearless fashion, and speaks her mind with far less reserve, often resulting in sarcastic, blunt George Burns-esque comments that serve as frequent punch-lines within scenes. Estelle Getty's character on *The Golden Girls* was so popular that the actress, who wore a wig and thick glasses to

¹⁹⁴ See Jake Harwood and Howard Giles. "'Don't Make Me Laugh': Age Representations in a Humorous Context," *Discourse & Society* 3.3 (1992): 404.

appear much older than her actual age, played similarly aged, sarcastic characters in film comedies like *Mannequin* (Michael Gottlieb, 1987) and *Stop, Or My Mom Will Shoot!* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1992). The hit film *Cocoon* (Ron Howard, 1985) of this same time period similarly employs elder kitsch within mainstream, middlebrow entertainment to serve as comedic dressing to blander protagonists. Young protagonist Steve Guttenberg gets the main plotline and romantic interest, but the sideshow antics of Don Ameche, Wilford Brimley, Hume Cronyn, as partying, sexed-up, newly rejuvenated retirees, steal the show.

More recently, we can see Getty's costar from *The Golden Girls*, Betty White's popularization as an icon of elder kitsch, making frequent appearances on popular, youth-friendly programming like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *Saturday Night Live*, and *Community*, as well as playing a starring role on two, the sitcom *Hot in Cleveland* (TV Land, 2010-2013), and the aforementioned senior citizen prank show *Betty White's Off Their Rockers*. White's star persona in this latest incarnation is notably not that of the shrewd and scheming character she originally became famous for playing on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 1970s. Instead it is an elder-kitsch-ed-up version of the sweet but dim character she played on *The Golden Girls*, with whom a much younger generation would be familiar, whether through original airings or through reruns of the series. White's recent elder kitsch roles repeat a pattern originally played out in the first generation of elder kitsch stars in film and television that this project has studied. Just as stars like Buster Keaton, Peter Lorre, and Bette Davis were repurposed for the youth of the fifties and/or sixties, so too are Mae West, George Burns, and Betty White for the

youth of their late-career eras. Elder kitsch has become established as a space in which older stars can perform a version of their previous personas to public delight. Whether this delight is invoked from feelings of nostalgia, laughter-producing incongruity, or some combination of the two, it has become a completely normalized and ubiquitous trope in our culture in the decades since it first became popularly established.

This project has aimed to document the history of this trope so that the significance of its continued presence in our culture might be better understood. This history reveals the trope's development during a period in which the isolation of the aging (from the nuclear family, from the community at large) becomes increasingly normalized in American culture. The aging and aged move further from the center of family life and mainstream society during this time, moving from the family home to rest homes to entire retirement communities, set apart from external, broader communities. At the same time, there is in Hollywood, and other media industries to varying extents, movement away from creating product with an all-encompassing mainstream audience in mind, to focusing heavily on the youth market and segmenting the remaining audience into separate niches and demographics. As aging faces and bodies become less of a normal part of many people's daily lives, separated, increasingly as something other, one could easily view the embrace of this trope again and again as a kind of cultural self-medication, temporarily numbing all of the troubling things that old age has come to represent. Elder kitsch offers instead a simple and entertaining vision of old age unburdened from such fears, old people who are less threateningly "other," and more like the youthful audiences they are employed to entertain. And yet, there is still a

problematic dehumanization of the aging with the elder kitsch trope—they may behave as if old age is no reason not to act like the young—but the flatness of so many of these characterizations, presenting older stars as two-dimensional objects of kitsch, can be seen as simultaneously supporting a sense of otherness, merely reaffirming generational separation and difference.

It is this contradiction within the elder kitsch trope that makes its continuous presence in contemporary culture both troubling and worthy of further inquiry. It is my hope, as I conclude this project in its current form, that further inquiry will be undertaken. Any study of this type must define its parameters and its corpus, and, while I have done so deliberately and with care, there are inevitably films and stars that were not included in this project but that could further illuminate this history. The representation of elder figures in silent cinema is one particular area ripe for further exploration, as are those representations of later decades that are only mentioned in passing in this study or have been overlooked. Earlier representations of the 1910s and 1920s could help to provide additional context for my study of what came after, while further study of representations during the postwar period could only enhance and enrich this historical study. Although the centrality of the aging body and face to my theoretical argument has limited my analysis to visual representations, primarily in film and television texts, further analysis of a broader range of media (radio, theater, popular fiction) could certainly yield important insights and a more far-reaching analysis. The role of older stars in television is also an area demanding more in-depth and far-reaching analysis. There are, no doubt, more texts and star performances of early television that I have overlooked due to the

limits of time, circulation, and availability. Additionally, there are countless examples of elder kitsch that have popped up in film, television, and advertising over more recent decades, including those key figures like Burns and White, on whom I have touched only briefly in this final section, that deserve more attention than previous studies have given. The cultural, social, and historical analysis of this topic also can and should be deepened in a great number of areas; some intriguing directions for such research have hopefully been pointed out over the course of this study.

Ultimately with this project I have attempted to name a ubiquitous trope in our culture, elder kitsch, to historicize it and theorize it. The results are in no means meant to be a complete compendium of all elder representations or even all elder kitsch representations during the period examined, nor are they intended to be read as a complete exploration of this phenomenon. My hope is that I have begun a conversation about the role of this trope in American culture, and that future studies will continue and build upon it.

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