

**Liddy Susan (ed.), *Women, Ageing and the Screen Industries: Falling off a Cliff?* London:**

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**Reviewed by:** Christa van Raalte, Bournemouth University, UK

There has been a growing interest over the past 30 years in the representation of ageing, and in particular on the intersection of age and gender. Key texts that have focused on this intersection include collections edited by Woodward (1999) and Whelehan and Gwynne (2014) and Dolan's monograph (2020), while Gullette (2004) and Chivers (2011), meanwhile, in addressing age more generally, emphasise the gendered nature of age as it is experienced and represented in popular Western culture. These and other volumes are complemented by numerous journal articles – from sociologists, psychologists and gerontologists as well as from film, television and cultural scholars, interested in the intersection of age and gender in relation to texts and audiences. There has been rather less focus on the operation of age and gender in the industries that produce those texts and serve those audiences.

This collection, then, is timely. It takes as its premise that if on-screen representations matter, making a powerful contribution not only to the perception but also to the construction of social reality, then it matters who is making those representations. It sets out to explore the experiences and contributions of older women in producing Western film and television – primarily outside of Hollywood. The chapters employ a breadth of methodologies and perspectives to engage not just with the very “visible” work of performers and directors but also with “below the line” production workers and with festival organisers. This ambitious breadth of perspective is one of its strengths; it is also its

weakness, for not all the chapters are as well aligned with the book's project as others. Each, however, works on its own terms which makes for engaging and illuminating reading.

The introduction, "Putting Age in the Picture: Age and Ageism in the Screen Industries", incorporates a literature review that is at once wide-ranging and pertinent. Liddy provides an economical overview of ageism and sexism in the screen industries in relation to both employment behind the camera and on-screen roles. She finishes on a note of guarded optimism, before introducing the three sections that will shape the rest of the book.

The first section, "Women and Screen Production", comprises four accounts of the experiences of older women in production roles within the Australian, Swedish, UK and Irish screen industries respectively. All four are based on semi-structured interviews and encountered similar methodological challenges: firstly in a reluctance of many interviewees to discuss age, and secondly in the fact that at their samples, by definition, excluded women whose careers had not survived the dual challenges of gender and age. Shared themes emerging from the four studies included the difficulty of calling out ageism when it was encountered, but also the increased personal confidence felt by older women. Particular issues were also highlighted by the individual studies. Thus Erhart and Dooley's report on Australian picture editors remarked upon the divergence of their participants' experiences in different areas of the industry; Jansson and Wallenberg noted how their Swedish participants had found themselves to be at first too young, then too old but always the wrong fit for a male dominated industry; Cobb and Williams' UK-based contingent revealed that they stood a better chance of getting hired by other women (who, of course, constitute a minority of employers), but also celebrated feeling less pressure to enact femininity in

their working roles; Liddy's Irish contributors mourned lost opportunities and lost colleagues – especially where women had been late to establish careers, due to the slowing impact of family responsibilities. There was considerable repetition across these chapters, as they retraced much of the same ground. As a whole, however, this section did succeed in presenting a cumulative set of evidence across diverse national industries, which in itself delivered a powerful message about older women's working experiences.

The second section, "Interrogating Absence", addresses older women on screen (or, as implied in the title, their absence). Luciano's chapter on Italian Cinema explores three films centred on older women: a drama, a comedy and a documentary. Notwithstanding some brief discussion of the challenges facing older female performers, the focus here is on the representational strategies of the three texts. The author draws on ideas of mobility (Braidotti, 1994) and wilfulness (Ahmed, 2014) to analyse the narrative and imagery of each film, which makes for a compelling account but one that seems somewhat out of place in this volume. Vázquez brings the focus back to women who work in the industry, in this case ageing actresses in Spanish film. This study employs a rather different methodology from that utilised in the previous section, analysing pre-existing interviews in the mainstream press. The findings suggest that, with the exception of a few "character" players, actresses believe their value to be predicated on youth and beauty. As they age, they struggle to pick up good roles on film, often returning to the theatre, which they find to be more hospitable. There is some optimism expressed, especially as more female screenwriters emerge, but on the whole it seems the Spanish industry lags behind Hollywood in terms of roles for older women. The final chapter in this section is Pommer's account of on-screen women in German television, looking across genres to include factual entertainment as well as film

and television fiction. Like Vázquez, Pommer finds female performers to become less and less employable as they age, with women over 30 facing very limited career opportunities. Again, cross-national comparison serves to make a cumulative case for concern.

The third section, “For the Record: Contributions and Visibility”, offers three chapters on female film directors who have succeeded in carving out long careers in mid- twentieth-century film, contemporary Hollywood and arthouse cinema respectively. Any work of this nature is welcome, given the tendency to excise and undervalue the contribution of female film directors in film history and criticism. Apart from the longevity of their careers, however, these chapters seem to have a somewhat tenuous relationship with the subject of older women in the industry. It was also unfortunate that the exploration of “above the line” creatives was limited to film directors rather than embracing, for example, screenwriters and television producers. Miquel-Baldellou reviews the career of Ida Lupino with an emphasis on the strategies she employed to survive in an industry hostile to ageing women, with a move from acting to directing and from film to television, but her attempts to surface metatextual references to age in Lupino’s work are not entirely successful. Smythe’s account of Nora Ephron’s *Julie and Julia* (2009) presents an engaging discussion of alternative feminisms and a kind of paratextual mentoring, given an auteurist spin by her emphasis on Ephron’s own writing on food. It says very little, however about the experience or representation of ageing. Tincknell’s chapter on Jane Campion is again a welcome addition to the growing corpus of work on the director, and does mention in passing Campion’s own outspokenness about issues of age and gender in the mainstream film industry. Again, however, it adds very little to any discussion of older women in the screen

industries, other than to celebrate the achievements of a working director who turns 70 this year.

It is the final chapter in this section, taking a rather different tack from the others, that brings us back to the central theme of the book with the thoroughly uplifting self-help tale of Nuala O'Sullivan who set up the *Women Over 50 Film Festival*. Written with Deborah Jermyn, this account encapsulates many of the issues faced by women filmmakers, ranging from the lack of opportunities on offer, to the insidious internalisation of sexism and ageism by its victims. "...if the festival name makes you uncomfortable, I think, you need to look—really look—at what that uncomfortableness means, where it comes from. What is it about the word 'woman' or 'fifty', what is it about our name?"

Notwithstanding the issues of focus raised above, the book succeeds in creating a strong cumulative impression of the challenges faced by older women in these industries and their resolute battle to survive and thrive – together with the impact their contribution has on what we see on our screens. It represents an important intervention in the field, setting the stage for more work in this vein and begging the question, articulated by Cobb and Williams (p.75): "what would the screen industries look like if women were able to work into their 60s in greater numbers? What would be the stories they tell—about their lives and careers, and in the films and shows they made?"

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