Passing the baton: age, action and mentorship in three Hollywood films

Introduction

Aging poses particular challenges to the (literally or figuratively) super-human figure of the Hollywood action hero. Still more so when that figure is female, for, no matter how 'kick-ass' she might be, her identity is inextricably bound up with ideas of youth, beauty and sexuality. It is no surprise, then, that the emerging sub-genre of 'Geriaction' (Crossley and Fisher, 2021) is an almost exclusively male province featuring vanishingly few female stars (with *RED* (2010) and *RED 2* (2013) being the most striking exceptions to date). While action narratives have long offered the aging male star a role as mentor to his younger successor - passing on, as it were, the baton of patriarchal power, with a spot of Oedipal sparring along the way (as, for example, in *The Rookie* (1990) and *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007)), his female counterpart is largely absent from our screens. Indeed where our female action heroes have the benefit of a mentor (and they frequently do) that mentor is invariably male, (as in such diverse narratives as *The Long Kiss Goodnight* (1996), *Terminator Genysis* (2015) and *The Protégé* (2021)) reinforcing a sense that the power wielded by the female action hero is inherently masculine and provisional.

When it comes to the relationship between an older woman and the younger woman preparing to replace her, Hollywood is traditionally more likely to portray them as jealous rivals for the valuable commodities of male attention and male-controlled power, than as allies. Such relationships are haunted by the spectre of the 'wicked stepmother', an archetype which, as Marina Warner (1994), argues is politically and historically contingent, but none the less dangerous for that. She remains a culturally pervasive figure, replicated in the cinematic 'fairy tales' of the modern age. Examples range from *Monster-in- Law* (2005) and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), films which Shelley Cobb (2011) has argued rehearse different generational models of feminism through their female leads, to the classic dynamic of *All About Eve (*1950) which is predicated on the idea that there can be only one female star[i]. Within the logic of the Hollywood action film then, which has until recently tended to portray the female action lead (or indeed the female action sidekick) as a single, exceptional woman in a world of men, the older female mentor is practically a contradiction in terms.

In this chapter, I will explore how traditional patterns are disrupted in three female-led actions films – three films, incidentally, directed by women: *The Old Guard* (Gina Prince-Bythewood, 2020), *Mulan* (Niki Caro, 2020) and *Charlie's Angels* (Elizabeth Banks, 2019). Despite the stylistic and structural differences between them, all three, in their particular ways, challenge the trope of the jealous 'older woman' threatened by the usurping ingénue, and replace it with a narrative of mentorship and intergenerational ally-ship. I will argue that the affordances of the action genre are instrumental in making this shift possible, and that the narrative space opened up provides new opportunities for positive representations of older women.

Perspectives on aging: a question of relativity.

Western culture, Kathleen Woodward has argued, is dominated by the 'youthful structure of the look' (2006, p.162), whereby age is negatively contrasted with youth; older women, in particular, are frequently represented in terms of 'reductive role[s]' (2006, p.165) or rendered

altogether invisible. This is nowhere more evident than in cinema, the medium of the look. Here, as Dafna Lemish and Varda Muhlbauer have observed, not only do women tend to "vanish from the screen in central and powerful roles as they mature" they are also "less likely than older men to be presented as authority figures" (2012, p.167). Even in the relatively female friendly context of television drama, the older woman is too often positioned as 'the other', rendered invisible 'except for her role as either mother or grandmother' or 'used as a "metaphor", all too often linked with disease, isolation, worthlessness, vulnerability, dissatisfaction, and decrepitude' (Hant, 2007, p.1). In the context of the action film, a male-dominated genre within which even young women must still contend of with constructions of transgression and narrative strategies of recuperation (Purse 2011) older women, already doubly marginalised (Sontag, 1972), potentially find themselves at an even greater disadvantage. On the other hand the very fact that they do not sit comfortably within the genre, are not easily legible, in that context, in terms of traditional roles, may create opportunities to challenge those roles and move beyond them to create new archetypes for the older woman.

'Age', in the artificial, constructed world of cinema, is a something of a slippery concept, especially as it is applied to women. It can be looked at from three distinct, if overlapping, perspectives: actual age, 'playing age', and relative age.[ii] The actual, chronological age of an actress was often, in a pre-internet age, a closely guarded secret – and with good reason. For most of the 20th century, a female star's career was effectively over at 40. Bette Davies, when she played the fading Margo Channing in *All About Eve*, was 42; Gloria Swanson was 53 when she played the already-faded and aged movie star in *Sunset Boulevard,* (also made in 1950). Since then, Josephine Dolan suggests, the hegemonic stranglehold of Hollywood has ensured that 'the pattern of refusing to cast older female stars in significant roles, or casting them as marginal characters or as abject pathological figures, has become a globalized cinematic practice'' (2013: 343). The definition of 'older' has shifted somewhat in the last decade or so. Female stars continue to appear in a range of leading roles into their 40s and 50s – albeit with the support of a veritable army of personal trainers and plastic surgeons, devoted to maintaining a camera-ready standard of youth and beauty[iii]. Nevertheless, while 44% of top grossing films released in 2022 had female leads, only 10% featured a leading woman over 45, while 35% had an older male lead. (Neff et al, 2023)

Given the expansion, however glacial, in the numbers and varieties of roles for older women, the relative age of characters becomes critical in their structural and ideological positioning within a film. The sole action heroine, surrounded by men, may be able to maintain an ageless quality, but where the mature star is presented alongside a much younger ingénue she is aged by comparison and takes on a very different role within the narrative. Thus, for example, Charlize Theron, aged 42, plays the action lead in *Atomic Blonde* (2017) as youthful, vigorous and sexually alluring, while three years later in *The Old Guard* she is positioned as the experienced and world-weary Andy to KiKi Layne's naïve Nile, notwithstanding the former's diegetic immortality[iv]. In the other two films discussed in this chapter, the juxtaposition of older with younger female co-stars is likewise critical to our reading of the former in terms of age[v]. Thus Elisabeth Banks (45 and playing 40), in *Charlies Angels* is aged specifically by comparison with the much younger 'angels' and by her position of authority as a ranking officer ('Bosley') in their quasi-military organisation[vi]. Meanwhile Gong Li (55), as the witch Xianniang in *Mulan*, might have been rendered ageless

by her heavy make-up and supernatural martial prowess, were it not for her relationship with the very young and inexperienced heroine (Liu Yifei).

Gender, genre and generations: from stepmother to mentor

Cinematic representations of intergenerational relationships between women are often problematic. They tend to draw on overdetermined archetypes of the mother or stepmother – both presented as largely negative or at the very least challenging influences on the development of the younger woman. Maternal influence, if not exactly malign, is frequently limiting. Jane Flax associates the idealised maternal relationship in feminist thought with "cultural prohibitions on women's aggression and wishes for separation." (2012; 66) which is to say on their independence and agency. Meanwhile the removal (though death or displacement) of the mother in favour of a stepmother or alternative substitute invariably clears the way for displays of unbridled jealousy and resentment. Alison Winch has remarked that 'the portrayal of intergenerational interaction in the girlfriend flick is fraught and sometimes violent' (2012, p.78) reflecting, that this may in part reflect on an equally fraught relationship between feminisms. While this is undoubtedly a critical consideration in the cinema of a post-feminist era and one worthy of ongoing attention in the wake of Cobb's work (2011), these tensions can also be viewed as modern manifestations of a much older mythos.

The figure of the wicked stepmother has deep roots. Marina Warner, in *From the Beast to the Blonde,* discusses this myth at some length in the context of the European fairy tale[vii]. Not infrequently the wicked women in the original tales are jealous mothers, but elsewhere a 'splitting' of narrative functions, as described by Bruno Bettelheim, into 'a good (usually dead) mother and an evil stepmother' (1976, p69) protects the child listener from having to feel guilty about anger towards the actual mother. This 'split' was deliberately fostered by the Grimm Brothers, who softened the edges of many tales for a 19th century audience, and indeed echoes through both children's and adult literature in the succeeding centuries. (Thaden 1995; Henneberg 2010). Resisting the psychoanalytic interpretations favoured by Bettelheim and his successors, Warner insists on a socio-economic perspective. She suggests that these tales are not, in fact, 'concoctions from the depths of psyche' (p.238), but are rooted in the historical experiences of women: 'they are about power, battles over resources by dependents on patriarchal controllers of resources, as well as rivalry over sexual attention' (p.238). The wicked stepmother or jealous older woman is, in other words, a politically and historically contingent archetype – although none the less dangerous for that, with a remarkably resilient 'power to compact enmity, recharge it and recirculate it' (p.239). Indeed the shadow of the wicked stepmother, in one form or another, continues to haunt Western culture.

The same rivalry and enmity are repackaged in the replacement narrative of *All About Eve,* which takes a similar set of tensions but reverses the power dynamic and audience sympathies. The story of a young rival, who initially presents as an acolyte of the older leading lady but gradually evolves to take her place, effectively re-tells the tale of the 'wicked stepmother' from the older woman's perspective, articulating fears of aging, invisibility and redundancy. This peculiarly Hollywood take on the subject is afforded a mythic sense of inevitability and timelessness by the final scenes of the film in which we see that the fate of the newly- established Eve is already sealed by the presence of her own acolyte, Phoebe,

quite literally waiting in the wings. Like its mirror image the stepmother trope, the 'Eve' trope is historically contingent, dramatising competition for male-controlled resources between female subalterns. Like the stepmother trope, it is no less powerful for that.

However, it is by no means inevitable that intergenerational relationships between women must be dominated by these archetypes; female friendship between generations can be modelled otherwise. Action films create a space where such alternatives can be explored - a space in which family, domestic and romantic themes, together with their attendant archetypes, are often relegated to the margins of the text. The female action hero has already crossed a line in terms of culturally appropriate female behaviour, opening up new possibilities in terms of her relationships with her 'sisters in arms'. One such possibility is the relationship between mentor and mentee.

Margaret Gullette's insightful exploration of literary mentors, highlights four key characteristics of the mentoring relationship that tend to distinguish it from those dominated by familial dynamics and indeed familial metaphors (2019). Firstly, it is voluntary. Whatever the circumstantial, even accidental factors involved in bringing together mentor and mentee, their relationship is one not of biology or even legal obligation but of choice: each expresses agency in accepting the challenges the relationship brings. Secondly, it is predicated on a state of deficit in the mentee; as Gullette notes 'youth and ignorance are the common deficits' (p.69), with the older mentor supplying the requisite experience and wisdom to compensate through an education appropriate to the narrative' emergency'(p.83) in which they find themselves. In a culture where youth is routinely privileged over age this puts the older character at an unaccustomed representational advantage. Thirdly, the relationship is characterised by dynamics of identification and reciprocity. Each party recognises in the other a 'kindred spirit' (2019, p.77); each is, in some sense, 'saved' by the other, with the rescuer often becoming the rescued as their protégé grows in power and confidence. Finally, the role of the mentor is characterised to some degree by self-sacrifice. The 'survival-by-other' (p.82) of the protégé often involves the death of the mentor. Gullette speculates on the significance of such deaths, suggesting that, notwithstanding the temptation of oedipal interpretations, it speaks to the pragmatic requirement for the mentee to grow into independence and survive, ultimately, on their own terms.

Narratives of mentorship, quite closely aligned with those discussed by Gullette, are a common feature of action films. The mentor, in this context, has traditionally been male, however, regardless of the gender of his protégé. Typically involved in training the young female action hero in modes of physical combat, the male mentor joins a line-up of figures, (often actual or figurative fathers, dead or alive, good or bad) who perform the ideologically important function of legitimising and containing female violence within a patriarchal framework. The evolution of female mentors, then, in action film has considerable revolutionary potential. Of the three films discussed in this chapter, each, in its own way sets up then subverts what I will refer to as the 'stepmother' and 'Eve' tropes, exploiting the expectations and assumptions attendant on these tropes to dramatic effect; meanwhile each allows a different kind of intergenerational relationship to emerge between women who share a screen: that of mentorship.

'I'm 40 and I'm single and I have a cheese-shaped hole...': the counterfactual narrative in *Charlie's Angels*

Charlie's Angels, the most self-consciously feminist of the movies, and alas the weakest as a film, is also the most explicit in terms of constructing its narrative around the set up and subversion of gendered stereotypes. In a re-working of the franchise that started life as a television series (ABC 1976-81) and was revived for the first feature film in 2000, the Townsend Agency that employs the Angels is reconceived as an international network of cells, each with its own 'Bosley' (now a rank, rather than a name). John Bosley (played by an avuncular Patrick Stewart) retires from the service at the start of the film, and is replaced by Rebekah 'Boz' Bosley (Banks), the first former Angel to have been so promoted. Meanwhile Elena (Naomi Scott), an engineer working on 'Calista', an innovative power-generating technology, with a potentially catastrophic glitch, brings in the Angels when her employer will not listen to her concerns. As operation Calista progresses, Elena becomes the Angel's newest recruit - but Boz is mysteriously absent at critical moments, seemingly engaged in a separate operation of her own. We (and the Angels) are led to believe that Boz has 'turned' and that the trusted John Bosley, suspecting foul play, has returned to rescue Elena. In fact, it transpires that the opposite is true: it is John who is embittered, feeling cast aside by the agency, while Boz has been protecting her crew all along.

The way in which this narrative misdirection is set up relies heavily on the trope of the jealous older woman who feels threatened by her younger replacements. In the scene in which a wide-eyed Elena is introduced to the Angel's stash of food, fashion and weaponry, she asks whether Boz's announcement 'I need cheese' is a code of some kind. Boz, amused, tells her 'It's code for: I'm 40 and I'm single and I have a cheese-shaped hole that needs to be filled.' It is a humorous moment, but nevertheless it is one that highlights and problematises Boz's age. It explicitly references the stereotype of the disappointed, lonely 'spinster' – one which, as Susan Faludi (2009) has argued, remains a powerful weapon in the 'backlash' against feminism. So powerful is this stereotype that the film, in fact, has to do very little in terms of laying a trail of false evidence to guide us to this conclusion, relying primarily on a couple of shots of Boz driving away from the main action, together with John's suspicions (correct, as it turns out) that he is being watched.

After John Bosley's villainy has been exposed (and with it Boz's innocence) and the Angels have prevailed, the team hold a brief post-mortem, during which Sabrina (Kristen Stewart) and Jane (Ella Balinska) express disbelief that John, as 'a Bosley', could have betrayed them. In response, they, and by implication the audience, receive a wry reprimand from Boz: 'You had no trouble believing it was me'. The line functions as a metatextual commentary on the gendered expectations and assumptions that have facilitated the 'counterfactual' narrative. This moment is also significant when the narrative is understood as one of mentorship, as it speaks to a 'deficit' on the part of all the younger women, over and above the obvious greenness of their newest recruit. In succumbing to the 'stepmother' trope and misrecognising Boz, the Angels have evinced a deficit in feminism and female solidarity. In her role as mentor, Boz has effectively been tasked with restoring their wavering faith.

Mentorship in *Charlie's Angels* is unusual in being both professionalised and distributed. It is professionalised in that 'Bosley' is a quasi-military rank conferred on those within the organisation charged with training, advising and protecting the Angels. It is distributed in that, although Boz formally introduces Elena to the organisation and oversees her induction, it is her fellow Angels who support her and develop her skills on the ground. It is with the Angels, moreover, that Elena identifies and it is with them she develops a reciprocal relationship of comrades-in-arms. Nevertheless, Boz's mentoring role is pivotal. It is Boz (as we learn) who has recognised Elena's potential and brought her in, before Elena herself even

realises she is more than just a client to be protected, and it is Boz, at the head of an extended cavalry of Angels, who stages the final rescue, just when it looks as though all is lost. Significantly, an act of self-sacrifice by the mentor is central to this scene of salvation, as Boz drops lifeless to the floor. Her death is quickly revealed to be quite literally an 'act', a ruse to cause a distraction, as befits the light, comedic tone of the film. Yet it also functions as a nod to the archetype of the mentor, who selflessly steps aside to facilitate her protégé's development into independence.

This broader notion of the older mentor, passing the baton, as it were, to a younger woman who will succeed them is embodied in the final sequence of the film which features a number of older stars who have previously played Angels in one or other generation of the franchise, training up new recruits. This produces an ideological reversal of the 'Eve' narrative. The latter, (through the introduction of the latest ingénue, Phoebe) naturalises the tale of female competition and jealousy as one doomed to continue in perpetuity. *Charlies Angels*, on the other hand, proposes a narrative of continuous support and mentorship through the generations.

This is particularly significant given the original, explicitly patriarchal premise of the franchise that the female Angels are recruited, mentored and run by a male mentor, Bosley, and his shadowy boss, Charlie. Notwithstanding the playful tone of the movie, it encapsulates a serious ideological challenge in the way in which it overturns this model and sets about, effectively, cleaning house. The male 'Bosley' who trained Jane is killed early in the film, John is demoted and exposed, and finally we discover that the leadership role of 'Charlie' is also now filled by a woman. The extended army of Angels, moreover, who appear throughout the film to support the main protagonists, leave no room for doubt that the women own this space of action and agency. Boz herself is the personification of the idea that for the nascent female action hero, male mentorship (and male permission) is no longer required: this new army of action women is able to provide from within its own ranks.

'We are the same': Identity and the accidental mentor in *Mulan*

While *Charlie's Angels'* Boz is set up as a 'false villain', *Mulan's* Xianniang starts out as a very real threat to the film's eponymous heroine. Absent from any previous version of the Mulan myth, her western-influenced character is the invention of the writers Rick Jaffa and Amanda Silver, who deploy her as the vehicle for an explicitly feminist commentary on Mulan's situation and the existential challenges it brings.[viii] Village girl Mulan, more interested in practicing martial arts than developing the qualities required to make a successful marriage, runs away to join the army in order that her disabled father can avoid conscription. This involves the dual challenges of 'passing' as a boy and participating in a gruelling training programme, until their unit is sent to fight the Rouran warriors threatening Imperial China. Xianniang, a powerful, shape-shifting witch, is employed by the Rouran leader Böri Khan (Jason Scott Lee) as an adviser and spy. Her relationship with Mulan progresses, over the course of the film, from antagonist to ally as she sees our heroine develop into the young woman she might have been.

Xianniang, notwithstanding her exotic presentation,[ix] is very much a Hollywood creation, a witch in the western tradition.[x] As such, she has a great deal in common with the wicked stepmothers of recent fairy-tale movies, specifically Ravenna (Charlize Theron) in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012) and the eponymous villain/heroine (Angelina Jolie) of the

Maleficent films (2014 and 2019)[xi]. Besides their shared ability to terrorise their enemies in the portentous shape of a bird-of-prey, the three characters share a back-story of abuse and rejection by the world of men that has embittered and twisted them into wicked women. This narrative is made explicit in Xianniang's encounters with Mulan, presented as the parallel tale of a woman whose abilities, like Mulan's, have been deemed a threat and caused her to be ostracised from society, driving her to the dark side.

As in *Charlie's Angels,* the alliance that develops between the women in *Mulan* is thrown into relief by the spectre of a stereotypical counterfactual scenario: one, in this case, in which the female hero is pitted against a female nemesis. Certainly, the witch, initially presented as an antagonist, appears an unlikely mentor for Mulan. Nevertheless, the impact of her words and actions on Mulan's development and narrative trajectory, is recognisably that of a mentoring relationship.

Their first meeting occurs after a battle in which Mulan's regiment is routed, despite her display of skill and bravery. Wandering alone in the wilderness Mulan is attacked by Xianniang, who challenges her between blows, twice demanding 'who are you?'. Twice Mulan responds with her assumed name and rank. The witch warns her that her continued deceit 'poisons your chi' (reinforcing an earlier remark by Mulan's commanding officer on the need for a great soldier to be 'true'). Their physical sparring can be read in terms of that between mentor and rookie in male-led action films, serving to establish the mentor's temporary superiority while building the protégé's skill and strength. The conversation is more significant, however, as this addresses Mulan's real 'deficit': that she is not true to herself. Mulan's military training has already made her a soldier, but the mentor's intervention is needed to enable her to assume her true identity. The witch's final blow in their encounter appears at first to be fatal, but, as the voice-over[xii] makes explicit, it is Hua Jun (her male alter ego) who dies, while Mulan is reborn a female warrior.

Xianniang's analysis proves correct: in her true form Mulan is able to save her regiment, beating the enemy single handed. But revealing her gender means disgrace and banishment, and once again she finds herself alone in the wilderness. Once again her 'mentor' appears to help her make sense of her situation and decide her next course of action. In this second encounter the witch provides commentary on her own history and Mulan's predicament, pointing out the parallels and trying to recruit Mulan.

> I understand. I was a girl like you and people turned on me. You don't think I longed for a noble path? I have lived a life of exile … no country, no village, no family. We are the same.... Merge your path with mine. We will be strong together.

While the witch sees in Mulan a kindred spirit, the younger woman rejects this notion, along with the proposed alliance, insisting on her loyalty to the emperor. Xianniang, relegated again to the role of antagonist, gloats that that China has already lost as Khan is 'even now' entering the city. Thus, the witch unwittingly prompts Mulan's next move, as our heroine sets off to warn her regiment – and, as it transpires, lead them into battle. Xianniang's act of antagonism thus accidentally functions as one of mentorship.

It is clear that the witch's allegiance to Khan is one of convenience rather than true loyalty: conversely, while she has no interest in assisting the imperial army, she does develop a personal interest in and loyalty to Mulan herself. Thus, in the scenes that follow Xianniang

initially continues with her part in Khan's plans to take the city and capture the emperor - but only until Mulan confronts her, whereupon she is persuaded to betray her former master and 'take the noble path' by leading her protégé to the site of her final battle. Despite her aloof manner it is clear that the witch is proud of her protégé's achievement as 'a woman leading a man's army' and gratified when Mulan finally concedes that 'we are the same". When, preceding their final battle, Khan dismisses Mulan as 'a girl', Xianniang sharply corrects him: 'A woman. A warrior.'

Xianniang's final act is one of self-sacrifice, which simultaneously emphasises the connection between the two women. Khan aims an arrow at the witch's heart, then suddenly turns to shoot Mulan instead; Xianniang transforms herself into a falcon and flies into the path of the arrow to save Mulan, taking back her human form to die in Mulan's arms, whispering, as she draws her last breath, 'take your place, Mulan.' This is in effect an act of reciprocal salvation: Xianniang saves Mulan's life, but Mulan has saved Xianniang's soul.

The theme of identity (and identification) is central to Mulan's story as retold in this film, and her complex relationship with the older woman is central to that. The values engraved on her father's sword – 'Loyal, Brave, True' – the values to which she aspires, are, for Mulan, in tension. To be simultaneously true to her female identity and a brave warrior is constructed, in her social milieu, as a betrayal. To embrace her true identity, then, involves asserting her independence from social norms. The mentorship of the witch, herself a social outsider, gives Mulan the confidence to find this independent identity and the agency that goes with it. It also provides the audience with a meta-textual framing of the challenges involved. For Xianniang herself, the relationship offers an alternative to the classic role of the villainess, and liberation from the narrative trap embodied by the archetype of the jealous older woman.

Without Xianniang, Mulan's story is that of the exceptional woman who 'proves the rule' of naturalised patriarchal privilege. The introduction of a female mentor changes the dynamic, hinting at a revolutionary alternative. Just as the (initial) wickedness of the witch is explicitly constructed as socially contingent, her alliance with Mulan is constructed as oppositional to social forces, taking place outside their control, a defiant expression of Xianniang's own agency. It is significant that the desert outcrops where she twice meets Mulan are liminal spaces, away from society – a society in which a young woman's value is determined on the marriage market, and military prowess in such a woman is so aberrant that it is treated as a greater threat than foreign invasion itself, with a beleaguered army willing to sacrifice its best soldier to its ideology of gender. The third encounter between the two women is in a deserted throne room, a seat of power temporarily vacated by the men. Meanwhile the site of Mulan's final battle to save the emperor – the site where Xianniang, as it were, passes on the baton of female power - is the 'new palace', still under construction outside the walls of the imperial city. These moments stand in contrast to Mulan's other experiences which take place very much inside the socially determined environments of family, army and empire. Mulan and Xianniang are able to develop a collaborative, supportive, non-competitive relationship only by stepping outside the patriarchal world.

'She stabbed me – so I think she has potential': replacement and reciprocity in *The Old Guard*

The Old Guard offers all the key components of a tale of jealous rivalry between an older and a younger woman, but spun by the dynamics and tone of the film into one of comrades-in-arms. Shades of both the 'Eve' and the 'stepmother' plots haunt the text: a mature woman whose powers wane as the ingénue prepares to replace her; a younger woman effectively kidnapped and imprisoned by an older rival cut off from her real family. These counterfactual narratives serve to highlight, by contrast, the positive bond that develops between mentor and mentee. Andy (aka Andromache the Scythian[xiii]) is the leader of a small group of immortal beings who for centuries have stalked the battlefields and disasters of history, fighting on the side of justice. Nile is a young marine, 'killed' in the line of duty, who miraculously recovers, much to her consternation and that of her comrades. Andy tracks down and 'rescues' Nile, who struggles to come to terms with her new reality. When the rest of the group is betrayed by disenchanted member Booker (Matthias Schoenaerts) and taken prisoner by evil industrialist Merrick (Harry Melling), keen to exploit their gift, Nile must swiftly evolve from resentful ingénue to resourceful superhero and come to their rescue.

The first encounter between Andy and Nile is combative – although more in the vein of the male 'rookie' film than in that of any traditionally female-led genre. Nile is still traumatised by the experience of waking up after having had her throat cut, when Andy unceremoniously knocks her out and bundles her into a stolen Humvee. From Nile's point of view, Andy is an enemy operative who has abducted her against her will – and whom she is determined to resist. Andy is able to subdue her, but not without the kind of physical struggle that often underpins the relationship between male protagonists in the buddy film. The scene even includes the comedic elements that typically mark such struggles, with Andy's tactics including shooting Nile in the head and breaking her arm – from each of which Nile recovers with a comical combination of surprise and outrage. Andy, on the other hand rather enjoys the whole thing, reporting back to her colleagues: "She stabbed me – so I think she has potential".

When she learns the truth about her situation, Nile is both sceptical and resentful. She is especially resentful to find that her phone has been confiscated by Andy – an essential precaution in the diegetic context, but one that serves momentarily to position Nile as the sullen teen resisting the rules of the 'stepmother'. This dynamic is only reinforced when Andy explains that it will be best for Nile's family to presume her lost in action. Nile resists this proposition, together with the idea that she should accept the group as her new 'family'. She specifically rejects Andy as a role model when, having witnessed the aftermath of a battle in which Andy dispatches an entire unit of mercenaries in some fairly gruesome ways, she asks with disgust: 'Is that meant to be me?'

The line obliquely conjures a narrative of replacement, which is reinforced by the fact that, following this same battle, Andy discovers she has a minor wound that has not healed immediately – in other words she in no longer indestructible. Andy herself later makes this connection but in a way that references the mentor's recognition of a kindred spirit, rather than the jealous apprehension embodied in the 'stepmother' narrative:

> I think you showed up when I lost my immortality, so I could see what it was like.... remember what it was like to feel unbreakable. Remarkable. You reminded me there are people still worth fighting for.

Nile's initial rejection of Andy as a role model, and of the 'Old Guard' as her new comrades, are symptomatic of her 'deficit'. Her explanation that she does not like to kill is reassuring in one sense (a hero who does would be less than heroic), however at the same time it registers as an abdication of responsibility in the world of *The Old Guard*, where the forces of evil must be resisted through physical combat. Nile is already a soldier: like Mulan, she has no need of a mentor to teach her the physical skills required by a nascent action hero. What she does lack is acceptance of, and faith in the new mission that comes with her new situation. It is this that her new mentor will help her address – their relationship developing into one of reciprocity as the new superhero evolves.

When two of their group are captured by Merrick, Andy and Booker set out to raid his lab. Nile, having set her mind on leaving the group, is adamant that she will not take part – until she discovers that the firearms provided have been emptied of bullets, meaning that Andy has been set up. Nile's one woman rescue mission is initially motivated by simple concern for Andy's well-being. Along the way, however, she meets Copley (Chiwetel Ejiofor), the former CIA operative who has been researching the documented achievements of Andy and the other members Old Guard and their benevolent impact on human history. This alters Niles perception of her mentor, allowing her finally to identify with Andy as a worthy and heroic role-model.

The action sequences that follow provide opportunities for the two women to bond in ways typical of male action films. One key vignette, when Nile arrives in the lab where Andy is being held, emphasises the alignment between mentor and protégé: Nile tosses Andy a weapon, and they raise their arms as one to mow down a group of oncoming mercenaries in perfect unison. Another emphasises the reciprocity of the rescue narrative as Nile tries to protect the newly-mortal Andy, first by offering her body armour taken from a dead mercenary, then by offering her own body as a shield: 'I'll go first' – with both attempts rejected. Andy, notwithstanding a serious injury, insists 'I always go first'. She does however concede, after a beat: 'Next time, you go first' – setting the scene for a future relationship where the younger woman will take on a new role with the support of her mentor. Thus, the film, like *Charlie's Angels*, replaces the narrative of competition and replacement associated with *All About Eve*, with a positive narrative of succession – an alternative approach to immortality.

Conclusion: the powerful potential of the female mentor in action

The fact that the relationships between the female co-stars in all three of these films are able to defy stereotypical expectations, replacing the 'stepmother' and 'Eve' tropes with that of the mentor, can, at least in part, be attributed to the affordances of genre.

As Karen Hollinger (1998) has argued, the female friendship film, wherein relationships between women have traditionally been explored, is in effect a version of the woman's film. Concerning itself with 'issues of particular interest to women' (p.2), its focus is on intimacy and what Elizabeth Abel characterises as the therapeutic 'collaborative construction of meaning from experience' (1981, p.419) as both the engines and the benefits of female friendship. The male buddy film, by contrast 'typically fits comfortably within the larger confines of the action/adventure genre' (Hollinger 1998, p.1). Its protagonists tend to bond

instead over ‘shared interests and activities’ (p.24). Thus while male ‘buddies’ collaborate to act upon the world at large, their female counterparts may be socially disempowered, as Pat O’Connor has argued (1992, p.67), by the domesticated limitations of their intimacy.

Transposing relationships between women into an action-film environment appears to impact on the dynamics on those relationships. Shared action takes primacy over shared confidences as the basis for bonding, in a milieu where acting on the wider world is central to the drama. The tropes we associate with cinematic relationships between women are combined with others recognisable from male-led ‘buddy’ or ‘rookie’ films. The genre itself serves to create a space where action heroines operate on their own terms, rather than competing for resources controlled by men, such that the socio-economically contingent narratives of the ‘stepmother’ and ‘Eve’ are relegated to the shadows, of not entirely expunged. It becomes possible instead for a cooperative, mentoring relationship to develop between the older and younger woman.

Kathleen Woodward has argued that ageism is “entrenched in feminism itself”, and indeed in post-feminism, preoccupied as it is with the concerns of younger women. Where older women are acknowledged at all, she suggests, they are too often problematized or vilified (1999, p.xi). The mentor offers a positive alternative to the persistent archetypes that otherwise dominate these representations, and indeed a positive role for the older female star. The way the mentors role is embedded in the three films discussed in this chapter is crucial, moreover, to the feminist potential of the texts. In each the voluntary nature of the relationship, neither biologically nor socio-economically pre-determined, supports individual agency on both sides – a key ingredient of action heroism. Each, notwithstanding the physicality of the genre, valorises the maturity, wisdom and experience of the older woman, which is required to address the deficits of youth. It is clear that it is these qualities, rather than youth and beauty, that equip each mentor for the role[xiv]. Each film explores dynamics of identification, allegiance and reciprocity that are developed independently of any quasi-maternal relationship that might limit ‘individuality and aggressiveness’ (Hollinger, 1998 p. 23). On the contrary, all three of the older women at the centre of these films are explicitly depicted as warriors and mentors to warriors. Each, through narratives of literal or figurative self-sacrifice, positions its leading characters as part of a continuum towards a future in which the female action hero can ‘take her place’. The naturalisation of this ‘place’, moreover, is supported by the presence of a female mentor.

The male mentor so often found in female-led action narratives serves an important ideological function of containing and recuperating female action within patriarchal structures. The female mentor, by way of contrast, represents a direct challenge to those structures, ensuring that her protégé no longer requires the permission and deferred authority of a male mentor to justify her position. Gullette reminds us that the original Mentor, the man entrusted with the education of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, was in fact the goddess Athena in disguise. This suggests, she argues, ‘that when the stakes are high, it takes a goddess’ (2019, p.69). The latter-day goddesses of the screen who take on the role of mentor in these films make light work of overturning the ideological applecart, but the potential impact of their so doing within mainstream Hollywood texts should not be underestimated.

References

Abel, Elisabeth (1981) '(E) Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *6*(3), pp.413-435.

All About Eve, 1950. Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

Atomic Blonde, 2017. Directed by David Leitch. Hungary and Germany: Focus Features.

Bettelheim, Bruno (1976) *The uses of enchantment: The meaning and importance of fairy tales*. Knopf, distributed by Random House.

Charlie's Angels, 1976-1981. [Television series]. Spelling-Goldberg Productions. Los Angeles: ABC.

Charlie's Angels, 2000. Directed by McG. USA: Columbia Pictures.

Charlie's Angels, 2019. Directed by Elizabeth Banks. Turkey and Germany: Columbia Pictures.

Cobb, Shelley (2011) '"I'm Nothing Like You!": Postfeminist Generationalism and Female Stardom in the Contemporary Chick Flick,' in Melanie Waters (ed.) *Women on Screen: Feminism and Femininity in Visual Culture*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 31–44.

Crossley, Laura and Austin Fisher (2021) 'Geriaction Cinema: Introduction', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *49*(3), pp.130-135.

Desta, Yohana (2020) 'Mulan: Gong Li's Witch Character Is More Than Meets the Eye', *Vanity Fair*, 4th September. Available at: https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/09/mulan-gong-li-character-interview. [Accessed March 20th 2023]

Dolan, Josephine (2013) 'Smoothing the Wrinkles: Hollywood, ''Successful Ageing'' and the New Visibility of Older Female Stars', in Cynthia Carter, Linda Steiner, and Lisa McClaughlin (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender*, London & Routledge, pp. 342–351.

Faludi, Susan (2009) *Backlash: The undeclared war against American women*, New York: Crown.

Fatal Attraction, 1987. Directed by Adrian Lyne. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Flax, Jane. (2012) 'Forgotten Forms of Close Combat: Mothers and Daughters revisited', in *Disputed subjects: essays on psychoanalysis, politics, and philosophy*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, pp.59-71.

Gullette, Margaret, M. (2019) 'Saviors and Survivors: Narratives of Mentorship as Rescue', in Núria Casado-Gual, Emma Domínguez-Rué and Maricel Oró-Piqueras (eds.) *Re-discovering Age(ing): Narratives of Mentorship*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, pp.69-87.

Hant, Myrna (2007) *Television's mature women: A changing media archetype: From Bewitched to the Sopranos.* UCLA: Center for the Study of Women. Available at: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3357r9nz [Accessed 7th April 2023]

Henneberg, Sylvia (2010) 'Moms do badly, but grandmas do worse: The nexus of sexism and ageism in children's classics', *Journal of Aging Studies*, *24*(2), pp.125-134.

Hollinger, Karen (1998) *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. University of Minnesota Press.

Lemish, Dafna and Varda Muhlbauer (2012) '"Can't Have it All": Representations of Older Women in Popular Culture', *Women & Therapy*, 35(3-4), pp.165-180.

Lauzen, Martha (2022) *It's a Man's (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top Grossing U.S. Films of 2022.* Available at: https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/research/. [Accessed 13th April 2023.]

Live Free or Die Hard, 2007. Directed by Len Wiseman. USA: Twentieth Century Fox.

Maleficent, 2014. Directed by Robert Stromberg. UK: Walt Disney Pictures.

Maleficent: Mistress of Evil, 2019. Directed by Joachim Rǿnning. UK: Walt Disney Pictures.

Mayor, Adrienne (2014) *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women across the Ancient World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Monster-in- Law, 2005. Directed by Robert Luketic. USA: New Line Cinema.

Mulan, 2020. Directed by Niki Caro. China and New Zealand: Walt Disney Pictures.

Neff, Katherine L., Stacy L. Smith and Katherine Pieper (2023) *Inequality Across 1,600 Popular Films: Examining Gender, Race/Ethnicity & Age of Leads/Co Leads from 2007 to 2022.* Available at: https://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality-1600-films-20230216.pdf. [Accessed 13th April 2023.]

O'Connor, Pat (1992) *Friendships between Women: A Critical Review*. London: Guilford Press

Popp, Olivia (2020) 'How Mulan's Xianniang complicates the concept of the witch', *SyFy*, 12th September. Available at: https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/how-mulans-xianniang-complicates-the-concept-of-the-witch. [Accessed 20th March 2023.]

Lisa Purse, Lisa (2011) 'Return of the "Angry Woman": Authenticating Female Physical Action in Contemporary Cinema' in Melanie Waters (ed.) *Women on screen: feminism and femininity in visual culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

RED, 2010. Directed by Robert Schwentke. Canada: Summit Entertainment.

RED 2, 2013. Directed by Dean Parisot. Canada and UK: Summit Entertainment.

Russo, Mary (1999) 'Ageing and the Scandal of Anachronism', in Kathleen Woodward (ed.) *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 20-33.

Snow White and the Huntsman, 2012. Directed by Rupert Sanders. UK: Universal Pictures.

Susan, Susan (1972) 'The double standard of aging', *Saturday Review of Literature,* 39 pp.29-38

Sunset Boulevard, 1950. Directed by Billy Wilder. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Terminator Genysis, 2015. Directed by Alan Taylor. USA: Paramount Pictures.

Thaden, B. (1995). Elizabeth Gaskell and the Dead Mother Plot: *New essays on the maternal voice in the nineteenth century* (pp. 31−50). Dallas: Contemporary Research Press.

The Devil Wears Prada, 2006. Directed by David Frankel. USA and France: Twentieth Century Fox.

The Long Kiss Goodnight, 1996. Directed by Renny Harlin. Canada: New Line Cinema.

The Old Guard, 2020. Directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. UK: Netflix.

The Protégé, 2021. Directed by Martin Campbell. Romans, Bulgaria, Vietnam, UK: Millennium Media.

The Rookie, 1990. Directed by Clint Eastwood. USA: Malpaso Productions.

Warner, Marina (1995) *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*. London: Random House.

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?, 1962. Directed by Robert Aldrich. USA: The Associates & Aldrich Company.

Winch, Alison (2012) '"We Can Have it All": The Girlfriend Flick', *Feminist Media Studies*, 12(1), pp. 69-82.

Woodward, Kathleen (1999) *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies and Generations.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Woodward, Kathleen (2006) 'Performing Age, Performing Gender', *NWSA Journal* 18 (1), pp.162-189.

---

[i] Albeit transposed in the film from cinema to Broadway.

[ii] Broadly analogous to what Woodward calls 'chronological age', 'biological age' and 'social age' respectively (1991,p.149)

[iii] Dolan notes the gendered nature of what Hollywood requires of its 'successfully aging' stars: aging stars: the men are required to remain 'firm and hard', whereas the woman are expected to appear 'smooth and firm' (2013, p.227) is they are to avoid what Mary Russo has called 'the scandal of anachronism' (2019, p20).

[iv] A construct that seems to explicitly reference press fascination with the actor's persistently youthful appearance.

[v] In this they differ from *RED* (Schwentke, 2010) and *Terminator: Dark Fate* (Miller, 2019) in which cinematic 'grand dames' Helen Mirren and Linda Hamilton respectively, both in their 60s at time of shooting, wear their undisguised age as a survivor's badge of honour.

[vi] Indeed just two years later, in *Call Jane* (Phyllis Nagy, 2022) Banks plays the relatively young (and, significantly, pregnant) woman juxtaposed with another '*grande dame'* of Hollywood, Sigourney Weaver (aged 63).

[vii] Warner suggests global implications for the specifically European trope since 'All over the world, stories which centre on a heroine, on a young woman suffering a prolonged ordeal,

before her vindication and triumph, frequently focus on women as the agents of her suffering' (1995, p.202).

[viii] In an interview with Vanity Fair, Silver explains how the witch developed from 'uber-villain' into a far more complex character: 'The truth is that women with power have been vilified for a very long time.... The more powerful they are, the more threatening they can be.' (Desta, 2020)

[ix] Reminiscent of Gong Li's demonic role in *The Monkey King 2* (Soi Cheang, 2016).

[x] The 'witch' as a powerful woman, with magical powers, feared and ostracised by society is not part of the Chinese tradition (Popp, 2020).

[xi] Both, notably, played by action stars with reputations for agelessness.

[xii] Especially significant as it is the only instance of such a device in the film.

[xiii] The Scythians, central European nomads of the ancient world who included female warriors in their ranks, are credited with giving rise to the Greek myth of the Amazons (Mayor, 2014).

[xiv] Notwithstanding the professionally well-preserved youthfulness of each of the older stars.