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I, ANNA (2012) AND THE FEMME FATALE: NEO-NOIR AND REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE OLD AGE

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ABSTRACT

Through textual analysis this paper explores neo-noir film *I, Anna* (Southcombe, 2012). This paper promotes the concept of the femme fatale in modern film noir as having much to offer women and ageing studies. Older women on screen have commonly been theorised within two opposing paradigms: ageing as decline, and ageing successfully. This paper argues that through a specific representation of the aged femme fatale body *I, Anna* offers a destabilisation of the common femme fatale stereotype. This contributes a more nuanced understanding of women and ageing on screen than the representations that are usually discussed in film and/or ageing studies. This paper also marks out this neo-noir British film as an interesting avenue from which to explore the representation of ageing women in film, as existing research has so far focussed on romantic comedy and bio-pic. This paper therefore seeks to add to the growing body of new work on female ageing and representations in the media.

KEYWORDS

Women and Ageing; Neo-noir film; Femme fatale; Ageing Body; Stereotypes; Sexuality

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore how far the neo-noir film *I, Anna* (2012) reconceptualises the femme fatale through the lens of age, and using the concept of cultural verisimilitude (Neale, 1981; Geraghty, 1991) examines how the film contributes to current debates on cultural ageing. It explores the representation of the body of the femme fatale in Barnaby Southcombe's adaptation of Elsa Lewin's best-selling novel (1983), and asks how far such representations work to destabilise or sustain common stereotypes of female ageing on screen, which are currently located within the paradigms of success (Rowe and Khan, 1987, 1997) or decline (Sandberg, 2013). As both paradigms of old age are informed by a variety of economic, biological, class-based and racial differences that become subsumed by the term 'old' (Cruikskank, 2003, pp. 2-8), this paper hopes to mark out this neo-noir British film as an avenue in which a more nuanced understanding of the representation of the older woman in film might be located.

As Phillip Lumby (2012) argues 'noir can be seen as a platform for exploring and challenging traditional perceptions of gender roles,' (p. 58). Or in other words, as Molly Haskell (1974) suggests 'women have grounds for protest, and film is a rich

field for the mining of female stereotypes,' (p. 30). The femme fatale of film noir is typically associated with youth and seductive feminine beauty (Kaplan, 1998; Hanson, 2007) but what happens to this iconic figure when interpreted through the lens of age and what does this re-working of the femme fatale tell us about contemporary discourses of ageing in relation to women?

This paper will start by offering a synopsis of *I, Anna,* establishing conventions of classic film noir as a basis from which to explore 'neo-noir' and the cinematic and narrative features of *I, Anna*. The concept of the femme fatale will then be analysed in relation to ageing. This paper will then explore the film in order to locate the ageing femme fatale as a site of epistemological trauma (Doane, 1991, p. 1); a representation of an older woman that works to unsettle common stereotypes of the ageing woman as protagonist on screen, and one which contributes to a (much needed) developing repertoire of available images of older women in the media.[1]

Film Synopsis

Set against the typical film noir backdrop of a night-time urban space (London), *I, Anna* is the story of female protagonist (and femme fatale) Anna Welles (Charlotte Rampling), a divorcee who is reluctantly re-entering the dating world by attending her first 'singles mixer'. At the singles mixer, Anna is approached by George (Ralph Brown), a charismatic enough man who catches her eye at the bar. After sharing some drinks, Anna and George head back to his flat. The singles mixer becomes the catalyst for the dramatic elements of noir to come into play in the film – what is then recounted, through flashback, is a litany of deceit, murder and death.

[1] I see this paper as sitting within a 'wave' of new scholarship on representations of ageing women in the media. For scholarship that embodies the 'crest' of the wave see Dolan, J. & Tincknell, E. eds. (2012) *Aging Femininities: Troubling Representations,* Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing; Chivers, S. (2003) *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives,* Columbus: The Ohio State University Press; Jennings, Ros and Gardner, Abigail eds. (2012) '*Rock On': Women, Ageing and Popular Music*, Aldershot: Ashgate, November 2012. Similarly, this paper is a result of interactions with a series of inspiring papers delivered at WAM Summer Schools 2012 and 2013: Ulla Kriebernegg, 'Defeating the Nursing Home Spectre: Celebrations of Life in the Canadian Short Film *Rhonda's Party;'* Susan Liddy, 'Representations of mature, female sexuality in British and Irish film;' Claire Mortimer 'It Ain't Natural Her Not Having a Husband!': The Spinster in Post -War British Film Comedy'; and Maricel Oró Piqueras, 'The ageing woman in TV series Brothers and Sisters' represent a selection of emerging scholarship in this field.

The stereotypical noir detective (down-trodden, ineffectual, fellow divorcee and long-time insomniac) Bernie Reid (Gabriel Byrne) leads the investigation into George's murder. In true film noir style it is apparent from the outset that Anna was involved in George's death, though Bernie is the last to realise this.

Anna enters this noir world under the more confident pseudonym/persona of 'Allegra', though we know inherently that this protagonist is 'Anna,' due to the positioning of the film's opening titles before this scene. As the film progresses, we realise this act of identity deception results in buying Anna some much needed time during the murder investigation that she becomes embroiled in. This act of identity deception in itself also speaks to wider issues surrounding dating as an older woman. The film explores older female sexuality through the singles mixer encounter with George and then the relationship that develops with the Detective Bernie. She is, thus, represented as a sexual older woman, which works against the stereotype of the more usual asexual doting grandmother. It is therefore significant that on their first date Anna tells Bernie that she was "never any good with babies." This emphasises her position as 'other,' in relation to the traditional notions of older heterosexual women as (grand)mothers/caregivers/nurturers.

The film's closure reveals that Anna cannot remember the night George died because the memory of it has become entangled with an earlier trauma: leaving her baby granddaughter outside a telephone box, where she is hit and killed by a car. Anna does not die at the end of the film, as is often the ultimate punishment for the femme fatale figure in film noir, rather the film ends with Bernie pulling Anna back from the ledge of George's high-rise flat, as her traumatic memories of George's murder and her granddaughter's death return to her.

Classic Film Noir

Historically, film noir is associated with a range of films produced in Hollywood in the 1940s and 50s. These films, generally directed by European émigrés, were influenced by the aesthetic markers of German Expressionist cinema which can be evidenced in films such as *Laura* (Preminger, 1944), *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Hawks, 1946) and *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950). It is this period in particular that is generally felt to have constituted the grand-era of film noir (Bould, 2005).

Classic film noir can be identified by both thematic and formal elements, such as chiaroscuro mise-en-scène, dramatic camera angles, temporal disturbance through flash-back, and is characterised by predominantly urban night time settings (Cowie, 1993; Nelmes, 2012; Cook, 1996; Cook, 2007; Kaplan, 1999). Film noir, particularly through the figure of the femme fatale, creates an important space for the representation of powerful female sexuality on screen. This is emphasised by Andrew Spicer's (2007) argument that 'typical noir male protagonists are weak, confused, unstable, and ineffectual, damaged men who suffer from a range of psychological neuroses and who are unable to resolve the problems they face' (p.47). As Kirk C. Hyde (2006) suggests, classic noir films are commonly structured around this troubled or ineffectual man and his male colleague or friend 'who provides support, hope and companionship' (p.12) in the wake of his encounters with the dangerous and powerful figure of the femme fatale.

Christine Gledhill (1998) suggests that the world of noir is one 'of action defined in male terms; the locales, the situations, iconography, violence are conventions connoting the male sphere' (p.28). Disrupting this masculine sphere, noir plots revolve around 'questions of female sexuality, and sexual relationships involving patterns of deception, destruction and unrecognised revelations rather than by deductions of criminal activity from a web of clues' (p.29). The femme fatale is a a pivotal character in film noir, and has an iconic legacy that has translated into neo-noir in a number of ways which will be explored below.

The Femme fatale

Mary Ann Doane (1991) identifies three 'types' of woman that can be broadly described as femme fatale, stereotypes of women made popular in a variety of formats culminating in the 'golden era' of film noir in the 40s and 50s. She suggests that there was first the 'vamp of the Scandinavian and American silent cinemas,' an early example might be the beautiful Theda Bara in the 1915 silent film *A Fool There Was* (Powell,1915). Doane suggests another identifiable female character might be the diva of the Italian film, and of course, 'the femme fatale of film noir of the 1940s' (p.2) – though there are a number of fascinating choices, think of Rita Hayworth's Gilda in the film of the same name (Vidor, 1976), or Lauren Bacall's Vivian in *The Big Sleep*. Doane's 'types' of women have several things in common: a consciousness

of their sexuality, a tragic back-story or tragic/fated ending, greed, a destabilising power over the men in their lives, relationships that are ultimately destroyed or restored by love; and youth and beauty (Hanson, 2007).

Stylistically, noir femme fatales are characterised by curvaceous bodies, tight fitting clothing, smoky eye makeup, long flowing hairstyles, smoking (particularly with long cigarette holders) and in the post-classic colour film a penchant for red – think of the red dress and red lips of 'The Customer' in *Sin City* (Miller, 2005), or the red lipstick worn (and symbolically removed at the films closure) by Glenn Close as the Marquise Isabelle in *Dangerous Liaisons* (Frears, 1988).The significance of the colour red has been theorised as the 'Red Dress Effect' by Adam Pazda *et al* (2011). Pazda *et al* suggest that simply wearing the colour (it does not need to be tight fitting or exposing) incites a level of sexual awareness. When this reading of colour is used to examine film, we find it in noir as a device used to demarcate the femme fatales' sexual liberalism (either positively or negatively depending on the cultural milieu in which the film was produced). The significance of dress, fashion and colour will therefore be explored below in relation to the older femme fatale found in *I, Anna.*

Helen Hanson (2007) suggests that the femme fatale might be defined as 'sexually, and generically, transgressive: a female figure refusing to be defined by the socio-cultural norms of femininity, or contained by the male-addressed, generic operations of film noir narratives in which her fatality resulted in her ultimate destruction' (p. XV). Thus the femme fatale seems to operate along the binary of the destroyer or 'spider woman' of film noir (Kaplan, 1998) – for example, Marilyn Monroe as Rose in *Niagara* (Hathaway, 1953), the wife who seduces and plans to murder her husband; or the victim/woman who is punished for her active sexuality, such as Joan Crawford's Mildred Pierce in the film of the same name (Curtiz, 1945). This paper will extend these existing constructions of the femme fatale (as victim or spider woman) through the representation of the femme fatale in older age in *I, Anna*.

Kate Stables (1998) asserts that the neo-noirs that followed in the 1990s – such as *Disclosure* (Levinson, 1994), *The Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994), and *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992) – continued these themes of powerful female sexuality but more graphically and explicitly in line with the 'proliferation of a sexual discourse which dominates postmodern media, both in images of sexuality and debate about its

import' (p.167). Doane (1991) suggests that 'the femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a [site of] potential epistemological trauma' (p.i). Therefore the following exploration of the older femme fatale adds a crucial element to this discussion, especially when taken alongside E. Ann Kaplan's (1999) equation of female ageing and trauma.

As the epistemological and discursive unease of examining the representation of older women on screen is slowly being breached in academia, the lens of the older femme fatale provides a useful analytic tool for negotiating this struggle. As this paper will demonstrate, in reconfiguring the femme fatale as an older woman, *I, Anna* unsettles the commonly-understood stereotype of the young femme fatale, though the *function* of the character remains consistent. As Stables highlights, 'the postmodern film employs the fatale figure as a universal archetype […] but most significantly as an anxiety pointer, a figure who processes and displays cultural concerns through popular film' (1998, p. 171). This paper will suggest that *I, Anna* reflects and critiques contemporary anxieties about the ageing female form through its appropriation of an older femme fatale and its representation of the female ageing body on screen.

Although *I, Anna* seems a long way removed from the black and white Hollywood pictures produced in the 1940s and 1950s, it retains many of the core features of classic film noir (except, critically, for the age of the female protagonist). In his study of film noir from the 1960s-1980s, Leighton Grist (1994) argues that the [neo-noir] 'genre provides a framework within which ideological and formal challenge can be both expressed and contained within familiar, commercially [2] acceptable boundaries' (p.270).

Neo Noir

[2] Mark Bould (2005) holds that a tension between 'low-key and high-concept, between film noir and block buster aesthetics' implicit in classic film noir became central to the development of the neo-noir genre (p. 95). Bould argues that for film noir (and especially neo-noir) there exists a 'knee-jerk preference for "realist" over "fantastic", "independent" over "studio", low-budget over big-budget, European over Hollywood filmmaking to be persuasive' which suggests the number of different 'modes through which film noir continues to evoke the absurd and impenetrable world of late capitalism' (p.114). This paper explores issues surrounding the representation of the ageing woman and, as such, Bould's argument interestingly reminds us of the critique of capitalism found in ageing studies, for instance, Dolan's (2010) suggestion that 'the regulation of the aging body is inextricably linked to the regulation of the state within capitalist logic' (p. 12).

Conceptually, neo-noir remains difficult to define. Noir films 'contain elements shared by still other films, causing the genre to flourish from multiple centres' and with the passage of time it 'took on fresh concerns […] and exfoliated further, becoming fuzzier, harder to pin down' (Bould, 2005, p. 92).

In his reading of neo-noir films such as *Guncrazy* (Davis, 1992), *The Killing Time* (King, 1987) and *Jezebel's Kiss* (Keith, 1990), Alain Silver (1996) suggests there are a range of noir-inspired elements that have 'carried over' into more modern ventures. The use of flashback and voice over characteristic of classic noir continue to feature in many neo-noir films, economic devices which serve to 'create narrative layers' (p.335). Stylistically, the use of darkness and light through chiaroscuro and the benefit of isolated urban locations continue to feature in neo-noir films which, as Silver suggests 'permit a spare and stark visualisation' (p.336) reminiscent of classic film noir ventures such as *Border Incident* (Mann,1949). Similarly, many low-medium budget neo-noir ventures retain the use of a small cast which 'allows production values to be maximised' (Silver, 1996, p.335). Crucially, neo-noir films retain the role of the femme fatale though, as this paper will demonstrate, the representation of this character has been modified to interact with modern cultural anxieties regarding age.

Jerold J. Abrams (2007) highlights 'the placing of social issues, like race, class, and gender, already latent in noir, at the forefront of dark cinema' (p.8) as a characteristic of noir that has carried over into neo-noir film. As Silver (1996) remarks, the noir genre has the ability to hold a mirror up to society in a way that other genres have been unable to do (p.338). As such, neo-noir films often present a critique of one aspect of society. Read from an ageing studies perspective, *I, Anna* seems to be holding up a mirror (literally – in the film – as well as figuratively) which invites us to re-examine our thoughts about older women.

Identifying Noir in *I, Anna*

Many of the elements of classic and more recent film noir feature in *I, Anna*. Stylistically, the film features markedly dark and moody scenery with much of it filmed at night in urban London, a feature of classic film noir as noted above. This modern colour film therefore works to echo the black and white, chiaroscuro visual style of film noir of the 1940s and 1950s.

Plot devices such as the non-linear progression of its narrative and its use of flash-back lend a distinctly noir feel to *I, Anna.* In this way, the film is reminiscent of classic film noir but also reminds the modern viewer of other contemporary ventures into neo-noir such as *Memento* (Nolan, 2000) and *Sin City* (Miller, 2005). The use of non-linear narrative in *I, Anna* is primarily achieved through flashback and memory sequences which has a critical impact on the representation of the older woman in this film, as discussed in more detail below.

In terms of the structure of relationships in the film, *I, Anna* echoes formulaic gendered relationships present in classic film noir as explored above. The relationship between Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) and Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson) in *Double Indemnity* is emulated in *I, Anna* as D.I. Kevin Franks (Eddie Marsan) fulfils the function of confidant and male companion to superior officer Bernie. Kevin Franks and Bernie's relationship is, in true noir style, disrupted by the arrival of the story's femme fatale, Anna.

Though many noir films centre on a male protagonist and femme fatale counterpart, *I, Anna* adheres to less-well established noir conventions by positioning the femme fatale as the main protagonist, as for example, in *Last Seduction* (Dahl, 1994). The disruption of the 'ways of looking' at the film that this creates, highlights the way that *I, Anna* can be seen to unsettle predominant representations of older women in (neo-noir) film – we *expect* Bernie to be the focus of the film with Anna as the peripheral counterpart. As Doane (1991) makes clear, 'what is particularly interesting about film noir for a feminist analysis [and, I argue, neo-noir] is the way in which the issue of knowledge and its possibility or impossibility is articulated with questions concerning femininity and visibility' (p.103). This paper explores the visibility of the ageing femme fatale body in *I, Anna*, and how we are invited to gaze at Anna's older body by exploring the femme fatale as it intersects with issues of display and age appropriacy.

Theorising Age

It is wise to pause briefly in order to explore the concepts of 'age,' 'ageing,' and 'aged' as they are used in this paper, in order to both problematise these terms and to situate this work within wider academic discourses present within cultural gerontology and ageing studies. As Bill Bytheway suggests 'later life is now

conceptualised in a confusing variety of ways' (2003, p.29). Older people are described in a number of ways: old, older, oldest, elderly, aged, and are often *classified* or categorised into three groups – young-old (65-74), old-old (74-84), and oldest-old (85+) (Garfein & Herzog, 1995).

The terminology used to describe these groups in themselves carry a culturally constructed set of assumptions, based around the ageing as success and ageing as decline paradigms. 'Young-old' invokes the positive image of 'youth' as opposed to the negative image of age as decline, in celebrating the continued ability and physicality of many members of this group. In a culture saturated with care home adverts, exposés and relentless political commentary on elderly care, 'oldest-old' or 'deep old age' (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1989) represents frailty, vulnerability and the medical, the antithesis to the activity of the 'young-old'. As Susan Pickard (2003) suggests oldest-old 'becomes tautologically synonymous with decline' (p. 2).

In terms of ontology, this paper similarly sits well with other 'second wave' ageing study scholars such as Josephine Dolan when she argues that 'old age can be seen as a discursive construction that is mapped onto particular bodies in a similar fashion to gender, sexuality, class, or race' (2010, p.2). This position enables the critique of the existing paradigms of ageing as decline/success, as it assumes that if age is a cultural construction then the categories of 'success' and 'decline' are culturally constructed around it. The depiction of the aged female body on screen presents a space from which to deconstruct these assumptions; a necessary task if we are to obtain a more nuanced understanding of the representation of older women on screen. It is from this feminist social constructivist position that *I, Anna* is read.

Similarly, this ontological underpinning works well with the feminist theoretical position from which this paper approaches the study of film. Feminist psychoanalysis provided the initial framework with which to interrogate the construction of the femme fatale in film noir (as in Doane, 1991, for example), though scholarship has now turned toward more narrative investigations of the cinematic content. As Julie Grossman (2009) suggests, such an approach to women on screen captures a more nuanced understanding of 'female stories and the social contexts presented in these films that are so central in generating their meaning and that often determine the fatalistic or traumatic tone of the films' (p. 2). By adopting a social constructivist

position this paper aims to expand on existing readings of the older woman in film commonly obtained through feminist psychoanalysis, for example, the pioneering work of Kuhn (1994), Mulvey (1975) and Haskell (1974). Laura Mulvey's seminal work politicised discourses about the representation of women on screen, a clarion call to feminist film scholars to use the critique of film as a 'political weapon' with which to destabilise 'the paradox of phallocentrism' present within patriarchal models of film production (1975, p. 28). As with gender before it, the representation of the aged, especially the older woman, is becoming an increasingly politicised topic.[3] This paper therefore comes at a time when a more sensitive and gradated reading of the older woman on film (and in life) is demanded.

How old is Anna?

It is not until nearly the end of *I, Anna* that we are invited to work out how old the female protagonist actually is, when her tax record is brought up on a computer screen. As this shot pans across the computer screen the audience is invited to read Anna's date of birth, but it is over too quickly to work out her age. The invitation is there to rewind and pause on this frame, in order to make out her date of birth. Anna was born 3rd April 1956, making her a chronological age of 57.

Anna, therefore, falls into none of Garfein & Herzog's (1995) categories nor is she a resident of Featherstone & Hepworth's (1989) 'deep old age'. Though Anna conforms to current World Health Organisation definitions of older in the global sense as being over 50, this paper finds common ground with Bytheway, who uses the terms 'later life' and 'older people' (2003, p. 29). In order to create a more nuanced understanding of the representation of the older woman on screen that departs from the ageing as decline or success paradigms, and given that Anna does not sit well within any pre-defined boundary, this paper moves away from categorising older people by chronological age. Instead, it explores the culturally

[3] The Women, Ageing and Media group (WAM) alongside the European Network of Aging Studies (ENAS) are doing much to politicise issues raised in research about women and ageing. In October 2013 the 'Charter on Ageism and Sexism in the Media,' developed by the New Dynamics of Ageing Group in collaboration with WAM, Women in Journalism and the National Union of Journalists was launched in London. WAM in particular are encouraging research based activism based on their findings. Read the WAM Manifesto here: http://insight.glos.ac.uk/researchmainpage/ResearchCentres/WAM/Pages/WAMManifesto.aspx

constructed nature of age and the representation of the older woman as femme fatale.

The Aged Femme Fatale Body

Doane (1990) speaks of the 'cinematic inscription of sexual differentiation in modes of looking' (p.31) and posits that this sexual difference is weighted male over female. In cinema, Doane never quite makes the point that the femme fatale in modern film destabilises this inscription, by shifting the focus of these 'modes of looking' toward a gaze that is situated in powerful femininity. *I, Anna,* then, presents the viewer with an example of this process at work as over 80-percent of the film is presented from a female intra-diegetic viewpoint with Anna's story being revealed piece by piece, through flash-back in classic film noir style.

Critically, this intra-diegetic viewpoint is also *aged.* In many scenes, the camera works like a mirror, into which Anna is seen applying a slick of bright red lipstick (the significance of which will be explored in more detail below). Mirror scenes are common in film noir (recall Rita Hayworth's constant examination of her appearance in the mirror in *Gilda*) and elsewhere when exploring issues of femininity, sexuality and identity on screen (see for example, Smelik, 1992). Janey Place (1998) suggests that the many mirror shots employed in film noir are used to 'indicate women's duplicitous nature' (p.58). Indeed in this scene, Anna is stood in George's bathroom and is a few moments away from beating him to death. Anna's raised eyebrow (Image 3) is disconcerting. Place (1998) suggests 'compositions in which reflections are stronger than the actual women, or in which mirror images are seen in odd, uncomfortable angles, help to create the mood of threat and fear' (p.58). The mirror scene therefore helps solidify Anna's identity as femme fatale.

Whilst the mirror scene solidifies Anna's femme fatale identity, the mirror/camera device also works as an invitation for the spectator to examine Anna's aged face. Her eyes are heavily hooded and lined and her hair is greying at the roots. Are we supposed to wonder if she dyes it? What are the connotations of this in light of work on the ageing female body and 'youthing' procedures and the cosmetic surgery industry (Davis, 1995, 1997, 2003; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Fraser, 2001)? By spending time analysing Anna's face in these shots, it seems that our reading of Anna's face is informed by a degree of cultural verisimilitude: it is an aged face – she

has lines, bags and grey hair – and yet represented as physically (and dangerously) beautiful, a characteristic of the femme fatale, an identity which works against the paradigms of ageing as success or decline.

Anna's body is fragmented in this scene (Mulvey, 1975) as her face is presented through a series of snapshots – first the lips and lower portion of her face, next her eyes and nose, and then close up of her face in full. The disarticulation of body parts employed through fragmentation, as Mulvey (1975) holds, 'integrate into the narrative a different mode of eroticism' (p.809) the voyeurism of the spectator. Fragmentation is also a noir device and thus, revealing Anna's face in separate, disarticulated parts, has a further function in this film, establishing its qualities as neo-noir. While other film noirs focus on signs of the femme fatale*'s* youth (the close ups of plump, red lips and flawless alabaster skin), in *I, Anna* the viewer is invited to focus on the physical signs of Anna's ageing. When her eyes are presented however and the spectator/voyeur makes eye contact with her, her defiant stare seems to challenge the audience's critique of her aged physicality. For example, in the final shot which depicts her full face, Anna raises an eyebrow for a split second and smirks into the mirror or at the audience.

The aged inter-diegetic viewpoint most visible in the 'mirror' scenes seems to work forcefully against viewing the ageing female on screen in terms of the paradigms of ageing as decline versus success, and invites us to explore the function of the youthful gaze in the context of film noir. Kathleen Woodward (2006) suggests:

> Given the ageism that saturates [American and English] visual culture […] we cast ourselves as younger in relation to the old person we see on the screen or in a photograph (as spectators we inhabit the position of an uncritical "younger than") unless […] we have educated ourselves to see past conventional and reductive ageist responses. (p.164)

The concentration on the physical aspects of her ageing and the invitation to the audience to critique her physicality through the mirror seem, initially, to echo traditional negative representations of the older woman on screen (ageing as decline). Diametrically opposed to this reading, however, we see Anna presented in these scenes as femme fatale*:* an aged woman who has ultimately commanded (or demanded through her femme fatale identity) a powerful aged female gaze, and who

demonstrates an *awareness* of the audience's gaze upon her (ageing as success). Thus, through the cultural verisimilitude of Anna's aged femme fatale body in the mirror scenes (and through challenging viewers' preconceived understandings of it) the film suggests a depiction of the ageing female body that sits neither in decline nor success.

Sexualising the Aged Femme fatale Body

The first sustained passage of dialogue from the opening scene of the film is worth quoting at length. Applying lipstick in the mirror (which becomes a frequent symbolic behaviour) in the public bathroom of the singles event, Anna watches two young women giggle and run out of a cubicle. Sighing, she smooth's down her tight, red dress and looks over at a woman (credited as 'Joan' – Honor Blackman) who is also applying red lipstick:

> Joan - "Chin up girl!"
> Anna - "You're right. What do they have that we don't?"
> Joan - "Nothing age can't better."
> Anna - "Want to share?"
> Joan - "Suction."
> Anna - "What?"
> Joan - "You heard me."
> Anna -"I don't do that."
> Joan - "I bet the little blonde he left you for does."
> Anna - "Actually, the split was mutual. We didn't realise what we had."
> Joan - "No honey, *you* didn't realise what you had. And now it's a bit late, isn't it? Things ain't what they used to be. We can meet the men we want now. We can choose. So get your skinny legs back out there and flaunt them!"

This sequence has a series of particular functions which have a critical impact on the way we read age in *I, Anna,* and the way Anna's femme fatale credentials can be verified. Through a series of cinematic devices the audience is invited to compare Anna's appearance with Joan's. Joan is fore-grounded and in focus and is lit in such a way that the audience is invited to focus on the signs of biological old age (her wrinkles and white hair). Anna is presented variously as out-of-focus or in a more

mid-range shot and in this way she is not subject to the pathologising gaze (Dolan, 2010, and see below) in the same way that Joan is. Joan's red lipstick and nail varnish are the shame shade as Anna's dress which comprises the invitation for the audience to make comparisons between the two women. The 'red dress effect' (Pazda et al, 2011) is therefore realised in this scene: Anna's femme fatale identity is indicated through the deliberate wearing of red to the singles mixer, a colour denoting sexuality, sensuousness, and, in film noir, danger. Moreover, though Joan is front of screen, her red lipstick and nails match Anna's dress, which serves to foreground Anna as the dominant figure in this scene, and reinforces the perception of her as femme fatale.

Alongside these cinematographic and stylistic choices the dialogue in this scene similarly problematises our implicit acceptance of Joan as simply 'old'. By offering Anna advice on both dating and the importance of sex ("suction"), Joan both reiterates a heteronormative discourse that insists on coupledom whilst subverting the usual culturally informed, age-related stereotype of comforting 'granny' or motherly 'nurturer.' This stereotype is further subverted by Joan's appearance: her makeup, her jewellery, and the shade of red of her lipstick and nails suggest Joan might easily be the femme fatale of another story. The sexualised nature of Blackman's most famous previous role as Pussy Galore in *Goldfinger* (Hamilton, 1964) is not lost on the viewer 'thinking with age,' when she is represented here in later life, and reminds us of Joanne Garde-Hansen's (2012) suggestion that Blackman is a 'vampish' and 'seductive' (p.163) star who continues to effectively manage her 'elderliness' through the media (p.170).

A third way in which this scene critically impacts on the way we read age in the film is that we are *told* that Anna is old, by her own admission "What do they have that we don't?". In doing this, Anna aligns herself with Joan and establishes difference with the younger women. Joan's dialogue also draws immediate attention to Anna's (ageing) body by instructing her to get her "skinny legs back out there." Anna's aged body is presented as admirable, desirable, as if her 'skinny legs,' *legs that belie her age* and legs that situate her appearance as femme fatale, will ultimately help her to find a partner. As Dolan suggests, contemporary discourses that surround the aged female body are concerned with 'an absence of wrinkles or extra flesh: an absence that constitutes firm skin and hard bodies as gendered signifiers of "youthful ageing,"'

(2010, p.2). Anna's legs as gendered signifiers of youthful ageing, then, become the visual focus of many later scenes, the locus of Bernie's desire for her, and one of the major visual indicators of her femme fatale identity: long, firm, legs culminating in stockinged feet enclosed in black, high heeled shoes, exposed beneath a tan-coloured mac (Place, 1998, p. 54).

Anna's appearance does not, however, seem pastiche – she looks comfortable, confident and powerful in her body – a point which is strengthened when one realises that Charlotte Rampling was in fact ten-years older than the character she played in this film. Already established as a sexy and sensual actress through a large number of roles from the 1960s onwards, Rampling' sex appeal has continued into older age. This is in part evidenced by several nude photo shoots with Juergen Teller, the 2008 shoot perhaps yielding the most provocative photographs. As Jane Shilling of the Telegraph suggests, Rampling 'looks no more ordinary as an elderly woman that she did as a young woman' (2013). It is precisely the extraordinary beauty of the femme fatale, the exquisiteness of her form and disposition, which constitutes her dangerous allure. In this way Rampling, as an actress with a host of films with provocative themes (see *The Night Porter* [Cavani, 1974] for example) under her belt, and a consciousness of her femininity in old age, lends her sex appeal and sophistication to the character of Anna, an edge and sexiness in older age which furthers the credibility of Anna's aged femme fatale identity.

In one scene, Anna is seen taking a bath in a deep tub – her shoulders, neck, arms (one wrist enclosed in a cast) and upper chest are exposed to the gaze of the audience. This scene reminds us of the scene in the classic noir film *Laura* in which Waldo Lydecker lies in his bathtub and recalls his relationship with the doomed femme fatale of the film's name. In *I, Anna,* this iconic scene is reconfigured: a naked, older woman fills the tub. Anna's ageing body is presented positively (if modestly) which contrasts with Elizabeth W. Markson (2003) when she suggests that 'viewing an older woman's body nude or nearly nude and not morphed by cosmetic surgery offends the female's social positioning as an object to be gazed at with admiration' (p.99). The audience is not offended by Anna's exposed skin due to the composition of the scene (perhaps due to our reminder of noir conventions established by the likes of *Laura*) and as Anna's modesty remains intact. Moreover, Anna's aged body is presented as sexually desirable, or to use Markson's terms

‘admirably.’ *I, Anna,* then, offers a positive reimagining of the nude older female body and modifies the gaze which has until now assessed the physical signs of the ageing naked body on the basis of the paradigms of decline or success.

Anna’s body is sexualised in a more explicit way, in a later scene that encompasses the height of the action. Acting on the advice wrought from her encounter with Joan (through the device of flashback in true noir style) Anna goes back to George’s apartment and begins to give him oral sex. When George becomes aggressive, Anna bites his penis. George attacks her, attempts to rape her, and fighting for her life, Anna bludgeons him to death. Read from a psychoanalytic feminist viewpoint, as with Mulvey (1975), this scene could be read as a typical cinematic representation of woman as locus of male fear of castration, with Anna herself embodying the act of castration in its physicality. More than this, however, it is in this scene that Anna can clearly be identified as a femme fatale. As Silver and Ursini (2004) suggest ‘of the many women who are principle characters in film noir, many are victims’ (p.131). Though a victim of sexual assault in this scene Anna refuses to be a victim in submitting to male sexual aggression. When Anna kills George in self-defence, however, we are reminded of the femme fatale victims of film noir: Wilma Tuttle, in *The Accused* (1949), and Nora Larkin, in *The Blue Gardenia* (Lang, 1953), who both ‘mortally wound a sexual predator’ (Silver & Ursini 2004, p.131). This echoes the femme fatale of the classic noir as explored above.

There are two further interpretations of this scene that impinge critically on what it is that this film ‘says’ about older women as femme fatale. First, the fact that Anna becomes a murderer can be read as her ultimate punishment for refusing to ‘act her age’ (in performing a sex act culturally associated with younger people). Such an interpretation is similarly bound up with the notion of ageing as decline, where old age becomes a slippery slope into deviance and decrepitude. This, however, is a reading that buttresses the cultural stereotype of the older woman and her correct ‘place,’ and one which reinforces the patriarchal hierarchy of film that Mulvey so lamented in the late 1970s.

Secondly, we could read this scene as presenting a more positive image of the older woman as a sexual being with the physical prowess to defend herself drawn from her femme fatale identity. Anna went back to George’s flat in order to have sex with

him. She drove them both there in her own car, and entered under her own volition. Anna's active pursuit of a sexual relationship works against predominant representations of the older woman as an asexual being, closeted in the bounds of care giving and domesticity. Though she sought sexual adventure, rather than sexual satisfaction, Anna's encounter with George has devastating consequences. *I, Anna* therefore seems to overturn conventional representations of older female sexuality through active sexuality and the vehicle of the femme fatale. The film does, however, still present a contradictory image of sexual encounters in later life: on the one hand, it offers a representation of the sexually active ageing woman; and on the other, the sexually active older woman is punished for transgressing expected sexual behaviours.

The Femme Fatale and the Clinical Gaze

Anna's aged body is also represented in another way that might on first glance appear to fit with more established representations of older female bodies on screen – the 'medicalised body' (Faircloth, 2003). This type of representation of the older woman on screen seems to invite an interrogation using the concept of the 'clinical gaze' first articulated by Michel Foucault (1973). Dolan (2010) suggests research into old age has been dominated by the medical and social sciences, and 'is typically underpinned by a set of embedded assumptions that equates aging with decline and vulnerability, assumptions founded on the clinical gaze' (pp.2-3). As this paper has asserted, *I, Anna* destabilises readings of older age based around these paradigms, and the medicalisation of Anna's ageing body is a key example of this destabilisation in process.

A close up of Anna's hands (see Image 7), replete with veins visible through the skin, provides evidence in support of Dolan's argument that 'effectively, the hands are constituted as signs of a "real old age" that cannot be effaced by the interventions of the "youthing" industry' (2010, p. 13).[4] As this paper has demonstrated, through her femme fatale identity, and through the depiction of the sexualised older female body, and one that has endured little (or no) extreme 'youthing' procedures, Anna's is an

[4] For more on the hands as signifiers of female old age, see also Diane Railton and Paul Watson (2011) '"She's So Vein": Madonna and the Drag of Ageing,' in J. Dolan & E. Tinknell (eds.) *Ageing Femininities: Representation, Identities, Feminism*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, pp.195-206.

older body that sits neither in decline nor success. *I, Anna* therefore seems to work against this discourse of pathologised ageing formulated against the backdrop of pharmaceutical and cosmetic intervention which works across the ageing as success or decline paradigms.

Anna's hands may show the signs of her age, but so does her (ageing) body and her (aged) face which have all worked to situate her in powerful femininity. She physically captures Bernie's sexual attention (he is first mesmerised by her legs – a device well used in classic film noir) and her physical form plays on his mind throughout the film (he constantly notices women who look like Anna). As such, Anna is represented in this film as a sexually desirable older woman whose ageing body sits neither in success nor decline: it simply 'is'.

In a scene half way through the film, Anna lifts up a milk carton and is gripped by pain in her wrist and decides to go to the hospital to have it examined. In this scene, the type of discourse that medicalises old age is simultaneously invoked and critically questioned by the film itself. The set comprises a hospital bay, bathed in blue and grey, plastic and steel, tubes and medical machines, and interestingly embodies potentially the brightest (or least noir-like) shot of the entire film. In this wide-shot, in which Anna's face and body are largely obscured by the blue hospital curtain, the disembodied (and slightly patronising) voice of the doctor can be heard saying, "Are you sure you didn't lift anything heavy? Don't worry, fractures are common in people your age."

The doctor's comment works in two ways: first, it reminds us of feminist discourses which suggest film noir addresses or critiques patriarchy, as the audience feels perturbed by the ease in which the male doctor condescendingly dismisses Anna's injury and questions her memory. As Grossmann (2009) suggests, this type of argument arose during a time when the femme fatale was seen as a projection of post-war male anxiety about changing or ambiguous gender roles (p.2). Second, we might read the doctor's diagnosis as an expression of male anxieties about ageing women: by dismissing Anna's injury as a symptom of her age (and her 'victim' femme fatale identity allows this), we are left to wonder if he would have treated a male patient of the same age in a similar way?

The audience feels instinctively that this injury cannot be reduced to the effects of old

age, though when Anna tells her daughter, “It’s just a fracture,” her daughter readily accepts this as part and parcel of her mother’s advancing years. The audience is left feeling uneasy about this diagnosis, however, a feeling attributable to the amount of work the film had already done by this point to situate Anna’s physical age in neither success nor decline. Rather, we are strongly inclined to feel that she was hurt during the struggle with George, though at this stage in the film we are still not sure what really happened: a disarticulation of events presented through flashback reminiscent of classic film noir. *I, Anna* therefore seems to critique normalised understandings of injury in old age, as Anna’s identity as femme fatale (and thus our complicit knowledge of her part in George’s murder) further critiques the clinical gaze, and the suggestion that all 'too easily ill health in ageing people is collapsed into the ageing process itself' (Kaplan, 1999, p.172).

Though we are eventually able to piece together the non-linear narrative presented to us through flashbacks, on first reading (and when viewed through the clinical gaze) it seems that Anna is suffering some kind of delusion and is vulnerable, fragile and confused. As Jane M. Ussher (2010) writes:

> It is a bitter irony: menstruation is positioned as woman’s curse yet the end of the menstruation years do not bring a reprieve from women being positioned as mad, moody or vulnerable because of the womb. (p.120)

Conditioned as we are by this dominant logic, we might read Anna’s memory-loss, vulnerability and fragility as symptomatic of her post-menopausal age; however, by positioning Anna as older femme fatale this film works against such a reading: Anna is not suffering because of her *age*, rather, it is a result of her *identity*: the dangerous, tragic and mysterious woman characteristic of film noir. Moreover, if we treat Anna’s memory-loss not as a biological precondition of her age, but as a symptom of her traumatic femme fatale identity, *I, Anna* might be usefully read as another sub-genre of neo-noir – amnesia noir (Abrams, 2007, p.17), as in *Memento,* for example.

Similarly, Anna’s position within the film – at times confused and vulnerable (though, as this paper has asserted, this is not attributable to her age) – links to the narrative mode of unreliable narration reminiscent of classic film noir such as *Detour* (Ulmer, 1945). As Volker Ferenz (2005) suggests, though the concept of the unreliable

narrator is traditionally attributed to voiceover narrators, films without this device can also contain elements of unreliable narration. This comprises moments when the audience makes ‘incorrect inferences about the story world’ based on their connection to the leading character. Ferenz asserts that films of this sort generally ‘feature some major twist or surprise effect which is so common in unreliable narration’ (p.137). The devices of splintered narrative and unreliable narration are, therefore, representative of film (noir) techniques which work to create tension and darkness, rather than indicators of this older female character’s dementia or madness.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that *I, Anna* offers a reconceptualisation of the femme fatale as an older woman, representing the ageing female body as sexy and desirable through this femme fatale identity. With its implicit engagement with themes and issues arising from women and ageing studies, *I, Anna,* presents a more positive image of the ageing woman than can usually be found in the media. As debates in the field return ‘consistently to the theme of the lack of positive images and role models for women who are ageing’ (Jennings, 2012), it appears that *I, Anna* may represent an important step along the path toward an increasing diversity of available images of ageing women.

The cultural verisimilitude of Anna's aged body: feminine, visible, beautiful, and sexual, has resulted in a reading of the older woman on screen which works to unsettle prevailing cultural discourses about ideal female beauty as Kaplan understood them fifteen-years ago. Conceived around the binary of ageing as success or decline, Kaplan wrote:

> As a woman's appearance begins to lose its youthfulness, there may be a crisis of identity: I am either good, beautiful, whole, and to be loved; or bad, ugly, fragmented and unlovable, according to the degree to which my appearance fits into prevailing cultural discourses about 'ideal' female beauty. (1999, p.174)

As Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton (2010) suggest in *Film and Ethics*, ‘the concept of “positive representation” derives from debates in early feminist film criticism of the 1960s in the sociologically informed so-called “images of women” tradition, and later

in identity-politics-driven gay and lesbian studies' (p.37). As this paper has demonstrated, debates over the positive representation of women on screen are ongoing, especially in terms of the repertoire of images of older women available in the media. Locating positive images (or at the very least, ensuring a multiplicity of images of older women) in the media, in film and on television in particular, is pivotal in the negotiation of such a crisis.

As 'victim' femme fatale, Anna is ultimately saved by Bernie at the end of *I, Anna* (in a homage to classic femmes fatale of film noir, for instance, in *The Big Sleep* and *Gilda*). By coming to a similar end as her younger femme fatale counterparts, found in both classic and neo-noir, Anna illustrates that the category of femme fatale need not be bounded in terms of chronological age: a credible femme fatale can be young *or* aged. Though the femme fatale remains a contested image of femininity, in figuring age into the concept of the femme fatale *I, Anna* constitutes a shift in the repertoire of cinematic images of older women, one which subverts the utility of reading age in terms of success of decline.

Thus, the film invites us to reconsider how we view the older female body on screen and, perhaps, in life. The textual analysis of *I, Anna* has shown that 'beautiful' and 'loveable' can relate to aged women just as much as young women, and that 'fragmented' need not mean 'demented': after all, though still vulnerable, as a red-cloaked, stockinged, intelligent and poised femme fatale, Anna is represented as desirable, sexual and, critically, *visible* and therefore runs counter to current narratives of ageing as decline and ageing as trauma.

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‘MISSING PERSONS’?[1]

REPRESENTATIONS OF MATURE FEMALE SEXUALITY

IN BRITISH AND IRISH FILM 1998-2011

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ABSTRACT

Research has indicated that a number of recent US films have challenged hegemonic definitions of mature women as asexual by validating the sexual pleasure and sexual agency of female characters over forty five years of age. This paper seeks to ascertain whether, and to what extent, this ideological shift is being replicated in British and Irish cinema. A content analysis establishes the number of British and Irish films, either domestic productions or co-productions, in which a mature female protagonist, or central character, is sexually active or demonstrates sexual desire.

A thematic, qualitative analysis of the corpus suggests that, in accordance with research on US films, the narratives of a small number of British and Irish films do indeed offer mature female sexuality conditional support, within certain parameters. With one exception, narratives implicitly identify marriage or romantic love as the appropriate forum for a mature character to express her sexuality. Further, the representation of active female sexuality is quite restrained in the vast majority of such films; it is primarily confined to an on-screen kiss and the majority of simulated sexual activity occurs pre- or post-coitus. Even if mature female characters are depicted as sexually active, the mature female body usually remains strategically concealed. Finally, mature female characters are white, middle class, slim and able-bodied women.

KEYWORDS

Women; Film; Sexuality; Ageing; Narratives; Representation

Introduction

Midlife and older women are significantly underrepresented as protagonists and central characters in US and UK film narratives (Sharp;2006;Tally, 2008; Lauzen, 2012) while, to date, Irish films have largely evaded any analysis through the lens of age. Older women languish on the margins in the vast majority of films but there is

[1] The title is inspired by Kathleen Woodward’s observation that the older woman has been ‘a missing person’ in psychoanalysis and feminist criticism (see Woodward, 1995).

another layer of invisibility that is the focus of this paper. Mature female characters, even if they are included in film narratives, more often than not, are represented as asexual. A snapshot of the representational history of older women is instructive: from the 1930s to the 1970s female characters over the age of fifty years of age were represented as 'saintly and asexual mothers' (Stoddard,1983, p.19); Oscar winning female actors over sixty five years of age were 'peripheral to the action, represented as rich dowagers, wives/mothers or lonely spinsters' in films from 1929 to 1995 (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p.137); women enjoy a shorter screen life than men and vanish from the screen at an earlier age (Lauzen and Dozier, 2005, p.443; Lauzen, 2012, p.2).

However, there are signs that discourses of mature female sexuality in the wider culture are beginning to change and the ageing process itself is being reconceptualised. Margaret Tally's (2006; 2008) and Rose Weitz's (2010) work on US narrative films suggests that while sexually active midlife women are still invisible in the overwhelming majority of US films, there are indications that a small number of film narratives are now reconsidering whether midlife women 'must renounce their sexuality because they are no longer young' (Tally, 2006, p.129). That said, Tally found that even these more progressive films also express a sense of ambivalence about older female sexuality and have 'an almost compulsive need to show these women come back into the family fold' (Tally, 2008, p.130).

Weitz's (2010) work provides a springboard to my own focus; she carried out a content analysis on the extent and nature of the representation of 'midlife' (45-64 years) sexuality in US narrative films from 2000 to 2007. As US 'baby boomers' age, Weitz argues, an apparent 'cultural shift' is taking place which includes increased interest in later-life sexuality. Her study stems from an interest in ascertaining to what extent 'a cultural acceptance' of specifically midlife female sexuality had developed in screen narratives as 'film producers have more motivation than ever before to address midlife issues' (Weitz, 2010, p.19). Weitz found that, of the 4000 films released into US cinemas between 2000 and 2007, thirteen films portrayed sexually active midlife women. Hence, a small number of recent films do affirm mature sexuality, albeit within clear boundaries: sexuality is expressed within committed relationships, within age appropriate couples, and among white, middle-class, slim women (Weitz, 2010, p. 27). This paper is concerned with whether, and to what

extent, British and Irish films are mirroring the small, but arguably significant, changes evidenced in US film since the late 1990s.

The scope of this piece of work differs from much of the previous British research on ageing femininity in film (Whelehan, 2010; Wearing, 2011). Rather than undertake a close reading of a small number of high profile films through the lens of age, the approach adopted here seeks to gain an overview of the representational landscape by providing a numerical base to a primarily qualitative analysis. The ethnographic 'turn' within audience research constructs audience members as active agents in the reception of media texts (Lull,1999; Morley,1986; Radway,1984). Texts can be 'read' in a number of ways; 'they offer dominant cultural interpretations as well as possibilities to read against the grain' (van Zoonen and Costera Meijer, 2002, p.331). However, a focus on film narratives remains a significant undertaking because media content provides such an important source of meaning about the social world, including hegemonic assumptions about mature female sexuality. That said, it should be noted that the importance of the production context cannot be overstated but, unfortunately, such an analysis is outside the scope of this paper.

Methods

Content Analysis

Mindful of Jane Stokes's argument that 'the strongest use of content analysis is to provide reliable data to support interpretative analysis' (2003, p. 66), a small-scale content analysis was undertaken to establish whether Weitz's (2010) US findings are echoed in British and Irish film, 1998-2011. John Deacon's assertion that (sometimes) 'frequency of occurrence does count' is persuasive (2008, p. 95). Having a quantitative base to interpretative work allows for: 'the identification, naming and categorisation of marginalised social groups […] an essential precondition for them to receive support, resources and respect' (Deacon, 2008, p. 96).

In order to identify the British films that were relevant to the research question I consulted the *UK Film Council Statistical Year Book*, 2002-2010[2] and the *BFI Statistical Yearbook*, 2011-2012. Only films between 1998 and 2012, with a minimum budget of £500,000 are included (BFI, 2012, p. 159). *The Irish Film Board Film Directory* (1992-2012) provided information relating to Irish films of the same period. In case I had inadvertently overlooked any relevant material, I cross-referenced my list of British and Irish films with films that are indexed within the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), www.imdb.com; the British Film institute (BFI) website, www.bfi.org.uk; the Sight and Sound archive www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound magazine; BFI Screenonline, http://www.screenonline.org.uk, – decade by decade; the London Independent Film Festival (LIFF) Winners and Official Selection Listings, 2007-2012 www.londonindependent.org/press.htm and Britmovie, www.britmovie.co.uk, using the key words: older women, midlife women, younger man/older woman. However, I acknowledge that, despite attempts to uncover every relevant British and Irish film produced from 1998-2011, it is still conceivable that there were unintentional omissions, though I am confident that any omissions are minor and would not distort the findings.

The the Internet Movie Database was consulted in order to identify the ages of all relevant female actors; and, with one exception, this was successful.[3] Films were assessed with reference to plot résumés and those that did not include *a* sexually active, female actor, aged forty five years and upwards, as a protagonist or central character, were disregarded. Twelve films from a total of 1,391 British films[4] produced between 1998 -2011 (Table 1) and five films from a total of one hundred and sixty two Irish films, produced during the same period (Table 2) represent mature female sexuality.

[2] The UK Film Council was disbanded in early 2011 and subsequent statistical yearbooks were published by the BFI. Although statistical yearbooks were not compiled until 2002, they carry relevant information on British film for the period 1998-2012 thus facilitating my analysis.
[3] Information relating to Jackie Howe, the protagonist in *Come on Eileen (2010)* was subsequently provided by Blinder, the film's Dublin-based production company.
[4] Prior to 2011, the statistical yearbooks, from which I gathered the data on British films only registered films with budgets of £500,000, and over. Low budget and micro-budget films were not tracked by the UK Film Council at all, until 2008. Hence, it was reluctantly decided to exclude them from this analysis but I am persuaded that the absence of this category is not numerically significant and does not distort my findings.

Table 1: British Films Surveyed

Film	Year Released	Mature Actress	Actress' Age (at film release)	Mature Woman as Protagonist / Central Character
Saving Grace	2000	Brenda Blethyn	54	Yes
Undertaking Betty	2002	Brenda Blethyn	56	Yes
Calendar Girls	2003	Helen Mirren	58	Yes
		Julie Walters	53	Yes
The Mother	2003	Ann Reid	68	Yes
Ladies in Lavender	2004	Judi Dench	70	Yes
Being Julia	2004	Annette Bening	46	Yes
Keeping Mum	2005	Kristin Scott Thomas	45	Yes
Notes on a Scandal	2006	Judi Dench	72	Yes
Ruby Blue	2007	Josiane Balasko	57	Yes
Irina Palm	2007	Marianne Faithful	55	Yes
Mamma Mia!	2008	Meryl Streep	59	Yes
The Last Station	2009	Helen Mirren	64	Yes

This initial quantitative overview facilitated the selection of a corpus for further analysis. Each film in the corpus was viewed multiple times and the themes that emerged in Weitz's findings – sexual absences, sexual gazes, affirming sexuality, sexual agency and sexual boundaries - also emerged in my corpus. Additionally, two further themes surfaced and were incorporated into my analysis; first, representations which indexed a specific link between motherhood and sexuality (maternal sexuality) and expressions of sexual desire that are not object-specific (sexual being) which registers the mature female character's sense of herself *as* sexual even when sexual intimacy, *per se*, is not developed in the narrative.

Table 2: Irish Films Surveyed

Film	Year Released	Mature Actress	Actress' Age (at film release)	Mature Woman as Protagonist/Central Character
Night Train	1998	Brenda Blethyn	52	Yes
Agnes Brown	1999	Anjelica Huston	48	Yes
Tara Road	2005	Andie MacDowell	47	Yes
A Tiger's Tail	2007	Kim Cattrall	51	Yes
Come On Eileen	2010	Jackie Howe	48	Yes

Analysis

Sexual Absences

As Table 1 and Table 2 indicate, midlife sexuality is absent in the vast majority of films produced in Britain and Ireland. Only twelve British films and five Irish films from the period 1998-2011 represent mature female sexuality. The category of 'sexual absence', as it pertains to the discussion here, relates to specific exclusions orchestrated by the narrative even in films that *do* challenge widely-held beliefs about the asexual nature of mature women. In five of the British films, *Saving Grace* (2000), *Undertaking Betty* (2002), *Irina Palm* (2007), *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *The Last Station* (2009), the only sexual activity engaged in by the protagonist is a passionate on-screen kiss. In *Saving Grace*, however, even the kiss is deferred by the narrative. Thus, recently widowed Grace Trevethyn (Brenda Bleythn) channels her horticultural expertise to the growing of marijuana plants in an effort to save her home from her dead husband's creditors. In the film, Grace tangles with French drug dealer, Jacques Chevalier (Tcheky Karyo). However, it is only in the closing minutes of the film that the audience learn, in a simulated television news report, that Grace and Jacques have married. Here, a black-and-white photograph of their kiss appears on screen which lacks the immediacy of on-screen narrative time and, arguably, serves to de-sexualize the scene. As Vivian Sobchak observes, there is a radical difference between 'the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema' (1994, p.83). The photograph does not really invite the spectator *into* the scene, Sobchak argues, though it may invite contemplation *of* the scene (1994, p.83).

Two Irish films, *Night Train* (1998) and *Tara Road* (2005), also include a mature female character passionately kissing on screen. In *Night Train,* Alice (Brenda Blethyn) falls in love with Michael Poole (John Hurt). Alice cares for her elderly, emotionally needy mother and Poole's sudden arrival in her life is a source of unexpected happiness and hope. However, the narrative does not explore the sexual nature of their relationship or her feelings about embarking on such a relationship for the first time, as a mature adult. While 'cinema is characterized by the relentless sexualisation of the female body' (Weitz, 2010, p.30), Alice is effectively desexualized in a manner unlikely to befall a younger female protagonist. A combined total of seven British and Irish films from the corpus represent mature female characters kissing passionately but not engaging in any further sexual activity.

Five British films, *The Mother* (2003), *Being Julia* (2004), *Keeping Mum* (2005), *Ruby Blue* (2007) and *The Last Station* portray mature female characters engaging in sexual relations or include scenes that imply sexual relations have taken place, or are about to take place. In three of these films, *Being Julia*, *Ruby Blue* and *The Last Station*, the sexual act occurs off screen; the female character is represented pre-coitus or post-coitus and the mature female body remains concealed throughout. In *The Last Station,* Sofya (Helen Mirren) and Leo (Christopher Plummer) kiss passionately as they nestle into the double bed. The camera pulls back from the bedroom but the viewer can hear their raucous laughter, suggestive of imminent sexual intimacy. Thus, the observations of Sally Chivers, in the context of US cinema, are equally true in relation to a number of British films : 'North American society dictates that aged bodies should be covered up to allow for a comfortable distancing; they should be prevented from telling "stories of getting old"' (2003, p. xxvii).

The Mother offers the most graphic representation of mature female sexuality in all the films from this sample. Interestingly, May (Ann Reid) is one of oldest protagonists in the combined total of sixteen British and Irish films. Indeed, Reid was sixty-eight years of age at the time of the film's release. May connects emotionally and physically with Darren, played by thirty-five year-old Daniel Craig, and the two become lovers. Further, neither the narrative nor the camera flinches from the

portrayal of May's sexual relationship with Darren as I will discuss shortly. Similarly, in *Keeping Mum*, Gloria Goodfellow (Kristin Scott Thomas) is sexually frustrated in her marriage to her vicar husband, Walter (Rowan Atkinson). When efforts to seduce him fail, she embarks on an affair with her golf instructor, Lance (Patrick Swazye). They kiss passionately, but the narrative defers the need for the protagonist to undress or to engage in on-screen sex with Lance. Only when Walter comes to his senses and realizes that the sexual act is part of the beauty of God's creation, does the narrative sanction on-screen sex for the female protagonist. Although Gloria's body remains fully clothed, *Keeping Mum* differs from all other British films, except *The Mother*, in its willingness to represent a mature female character engaging in the sexual act.

Two Irish films *The Tiger's Tail* (2006) and *Come on Eileen* (2010) also portray mature female characters in sexual relationships. Similar to the examples discussed in relation to British film, in *Come on Eileen,* Eileen (Jackie Howe) is shown in bed, post-coitus, with her younger lover Bill (Stephen Taylor). In contrast, in *The Tiger's Tail*, a black comedy about the excesses of Celtic Tiger Ireland, Jane (Kim Cattrall) plays the sexually-frustrated wife of Liam (Brendan Gleeson) and bemoans the fact that Liam never touches her anymore, thus articulating her sexual needs. The plot revolves around the appearance of Liam's doppelganger, who is intent on exchanging his own pedestrian life for Liam's status, money and power.

The doppelganger forces himself sexually on Jane in an (initially) non-consensual sexual act, though Jane eventually succumbs with groans of pleasure that effectively undermine her sexual autonomy. Thus, a number of rape myths are perpetuated: 'no' actually means 'yes' and 'real' rape is carried out by strangers not men with whom women are intimate (Banyard, 2010, p. 175). Surprisingly, like most of the other films in this sample, the mature female body remains concealed from view; ironic, given that Kim Cattrall was at least partially nude many times in *Sex and the City*. Arguably, it was a creative choice since the focus of the scene, in dramatic terms, was the triumph of the doppelganger. However, given the scant representation of sexually active older women in Irish cinema, the decision may have been more ideologically driven.

A combined total of seven British and Irish films represent mature female characters engaging in sexual activity, other than a kiss, albeit pre- or post-coital, with the mature female body hidden from view. The manner in which the narrative affirms mature female sexuality is typically restrained, even in those films that offer the mature female libido a degree of narrative space, giving credence to Kathleen Woodward's observation that 'the older female body is significant only in its absence' (2006, p.162).

Sexual Gazes

Sexual Gaze: Male

Informed by the work of Laura Mulvey (2009/1989), Liesbet van Zoonen argues that 'a core element of western patriarchal culture is the display of women as spectacle to be looked at, subjected to the gaze of the (male) audience' (1994, p.85). In this corpus, even in those films in which a mature female character is sexually active, there is an ambivalence about the sexualized display of the older female body. Three British films *The Mother*, *Calendar Girls* (2004) and *Keeping Mum* and three Irish films *Agnes Brown* (1999), *The Tiger's Tail* and *Come on Eileen* present the mature female body as spectacle. However, the familiar desiring gaze characteristic of much contemporary cinema is, at best, extremely muted in these films.

In *Keeping Mum,* Walter watches Gloria prepare for bed but she moves off camera to remove her bra and re-emerges in her nightdress, thus ensuring her naked breasts are not on display. In *Calendar Girls*, Chris, played by Helen Mirren, galvanizes women from the Women's Institute (WI) to pose nude for a charity calendar. However, their bodies (in sepia-tinted stills) are strategically positioned behind screening objects such as fruit and vegetables, arguably suggesting a resistance to mature female nudity, even when such nudity is at the heart of the narrative. The use of sepia as a photographic device may work to create a soothing psychological distance for an audience unused to the public display of the mature female body. Indeed, sepia is regarded as 'flattering' to the subject and, as Angela

Baker, one of the original WI women who posed nude for the 1999 calendar, commented: ‘older women can look a bit funny in colour’ (cited in Wilkes, 2009).

Concealing strategies are not deployed in *The Mother*. For instance, as May lies in bed with Darren, her breasts are fully exposed. Hence, unlike most of the British and Irish films of this period, *The Mother* does not reject the display of the sexualized, mature female body. This may be explained by the radical perspective of the screenwriter, Hanif Kureishi, who commented that it is important to look at the protagonist’s body without shame: ‘showing her not as grotesque, or beautiful, but as a person, a living thing’ (Lim, 2003). Kureishi goes on to observe that the inspiration for *The Mother* was sparked by a remark made by his own mother, who doubted she would ever be touched again following the death of her husband, Kureishi’s father. Hence, it could be argued that the author wrote the character of May as a conscious cultural intervention.

In the Irish film, *Agnes Brown*, Agnes (Angelica Huston) struggles to raise seven children alone in late 1960s working-class Dublin. Thinking her family is asleep, Agnes relaxes by listening to her favourite singer, Tom Jones, on the radio. Stripped to her undergarments (though her body is still concealed in a chaste nylon ‘slip’) she dances sensuously, swaying to the music. Agnes clutches a sweeping brush to her bosom, as if locked in embrace with a dance partner. The camera lingers on the movements of her body in its partially clothed silhouette, unlike most of the films in this corpus. Further, even though the arrival of one of her children ruptures the moment, the narrative implies that Agnes is a woman who is still sexually aware. Despite the burden of poverty, widowhood and motherhood, Agnes remains capable of displaying sensuality and the camera does not sidestep capturing that moment.

In *A Tiger’s Tail*, Liam’s *doppelgänger* watches Jane brush her hair at her dressing table mirror as she prepares for bed, his gaze lingering on the exposed flesh of her back. Similarly Eileen, (Jackie Howe) in *Come on Eileen*, is an alcoholic who has recently started to drink again. The camera lingers briefly on her body as she undresses to her bra before collapsing. However, within the context of the narrative, this behaviour is linked to her intoxication and is thus desexualized. The audience is thus positioned to view her actions as grotesque, rather than sexual.

A combined total of six out of seventeen British and Irish films in this corpus present the mature female body as an object of the male gaze. However, the older female body is never fully naked even in films that articulate an active mature female sexuality. In only two films, *The Mother* and *Calendar Girls* are female breasts even partially on display. This, we must infer that the spectacle of the mature female body is commonly perceived to be undesirable (in every sense) and best omitted. Indeed, as if to illustrate that point, in four British films (the distinction does not arise in any of the Irish films) *Undertaking Betty*, *Being Julia, Keeping Mum* and *Irina Palm,* the portrayal of sexuality in mature female characters contrasts sharply with that of the younger female actors who appear in varying stages of undress, in sexy lingerie or embroiled in sexual activity.

For example, in *Undertaking Betty*, downtrodden Betty, played by Brenda Blethyn, plans to leave her loveless marriage and embark on a new life with childhood sweetheart, Boris (Alfred Molina). Despite her assertion that, 'it's never too late for anything, ever', a single kiss in the last moments of the film is the extent of Betty's represented sexuality. In contrast, Meredith (Naomi Watts, aged thirty four) romps in bed with Hugh, Betty's husband (Robert Pugh), clad in sexy lingerie, stockings and suspenders. Thus, the different treatment bestowed upon the younger and older female body would seem to support Elizabeth Markson's observation that the female cinematic sexual body 'remains young, pure and fecund for the male voyeuristic gaze' (2003, p. 91) *even when* the narrative acknowledges the sexuality of older women.

Sexual Gaze – Female

In the context of this discussion, the female gaze relates to the objectification of the male body by the female character; an example of heterosexual female voyeurism, arguably increasingly apparent in popular culture (Attwood, 2011, p.205). In this corpus, the female gaze is exhibited in only four British films; *The Mother*, *Being Julia*, *Ladies in Lavender* (2004*) and Keeping Mum* and in one Irish film*, Agnes Brown*. This resonates with Katie Milestone and Anneke Meyer's observation that 'there is a female gaze but it is not as prevalent or as deeply rooted in our socio-cultural fabric. It remains the Other gaze and lacks the power of the male gaze' (2012, p.8).

In *The Mother*, May stops to gaze at Darren as he works bare-chested in the conservatory of her son's home. Similarly, Julia's eyes travel appreciatively over Tom's (Shaun Evans') body as he runs into the water in his swimming trunks just as Ursula, in *Ladies in Lavender,* fixes her gaze on Andrea (Daniel Bruhl) as he runs into the sea. In contrast, the audience is invited to gaze at Lance's athletic body from Gloria's voyeuristic point of view in *Keeping Mum* but only in a comedic sense. The desiring gaze is absent in the representation of Gloria's sexuality as Lance's body is framed as a source of humorous revulsion. The only Irish film to highlight the male body through the female gaze is *Agnes Brown*; the camera tracks Pierre (Arno Chevrier), the French baker, as he works and his muscular chest and arms are on display through his vest. Indeed, the young man is exoticized not only by his youth but by his Frenchness. Hence, a combined total of just six, out of the seventeen British and Irish films in my corpus, present the male body as an object of the (mature) female gaze.

Affirming Female Sexuality

All the British and Irish films in this corpus affirm mature women as sexually active, or as sexual beings, even if they do not express their sexuality actively within the narrative. This is the case whether they are mothers, single women, midlife or older women, although Barbara's (Judi Dench's) narrative journey in *Notes on a Scandal* (2006) is problematic. While her sexuality is acknowledged by the narrative, lesbian sexual desire is represented as 'other'; dangerous and out of control as I will go on to discuss. While, as illustrated previously, the narrative may minimize the articulation of mature female sexuality, overall these films suggest that sexuality is a necessary and important part of life. Also in evidence is a direct challenge to those cultural norms which exclusively pair youth and sex and which: 'make middle-aged and older people ashamed of their sexual desires' (Carpenter *et al*., 2006, p. 95).

Calendar Girls, effectively gives licence to mature women to discover their sexuality through the public display of their bodies. Indeed, these women make peace with their own perceived imperfections: 'grey hair, cellulite, the lot'. The film poses a challenge to the sexual discourses that prize 'tits' in so-called 'lads mags' but is disgusted by the sight of mature female breasts. Elsewhere, an explicit sexual desire

is articulated by Sofya in *The Last Station*. Feigning illness, she sends a message to her husband, Leo Tolstoy, to return home at once. Sofya awaits him in her double bed; her long hair is unpinned and tumbling over her bare shoulders: 'a release of inhibiting restraints, a sign of sexual readiness' (Brownmiller, 1984, p.61). Leo has long since denounced sexual pleasure and is celibate, much to Sofya's chagrin. But she encourages him with gentle sexual teasing: 'Look at me, this is who I am […] we may be older and maybe we're old but I'm still your little chicken and you're still my big cock. Come on, let me make you sing'.

Keeping Mum also acknowledges that women have sexual needs but suggests that these are best satisfied within marriage. Indeed, Gloria's plan to travel to Mexico with Lance is abandoned once Walter's sexual appetite returns. Similarly, *in Mamma Mia!*, Donna (Meryl Streep), is asked by her friend, Tanya (Christine Baranski) if she is 'getting any?'. If Donna is not sexually active, the inference is, she ought to be. Women and men of all ages need to remain sexually playful and, at the film's end, Donna is poised to fully express her sexuality. Indeed, Donna, Tanya, and Rosie (Julie Walters) are all in different ways, reawakened and invigorated when the opportunity for a sexual relationship presents itself. Early second wave feminism questioned marriage and monogamy as well as supporting sexual freedom; indeed it championed what Natasha Walter calls 'a defiant reclaiming of sexual pleasure' (2010, p. 86). However, in most mainstream cinema this only extends to the sexual activity of young women. As discussed, *The Last Station*, *Keeping Mum* and *Mamma Mia!* pose a significant challenge in this regard, validating, as they do, the sexual expression of mature women.

In the Irish film *Tara Road* the theme of affirming sexuality is present but does not emerge strongly in the narrative; Marilyn's sexuality is only expressed in a single passionate kiss to welcome her husband back into her life. Furthermore and as already noted, in *Come on Eileen* Eileen's sexuality is inextricably intertwined with her alcoholism. That said, her sexual relationship with Bill is accepted by her family without reproach and is problematized only when she starts to drink again. It is Eileen's relationship with alcohol rather than sex that challenges the security of her family. For instance, it is her return to drinking that prompts her son Jimmy (Felix Malcolm Still) to run away from home.

The value of sexual relations within these films is also affirmed through the articulation of loss and sadness. For instance, Julia is distraught to lose her lover, Tom, in *Being Julia*, the loss made more unbearable by his betrayal with a younger woman. This is because Tom's presence had injected passion into Julia's life 'when everything seemed so dull and unpromising'. The film concludes with Julia returning to a companionable marriage with her sexually unavailable husband; the *status quo* has been restored. Additionally, Julia discovers that her close friend and sometimes lover, Charles (Bruce Greenwood), is gay. At the film's end, Julia implicitly accepts that she can only rely on herself, going forward.

In *Ladies in Lavender,* Andreas, the young man with whom Ursula has fallen in love, leaves the home of Ursula and her sister Janet (Maggie Smith), in 1930s Cornwall. Rescued by the sisters from the sea and nursed back to health, Andreas eventually goes to London to embark on a career in music. Ursula's intense longing for the younger man is represented in a scene in which she climbs into his empty bed, visually articulating the ache that cannot be expressed in words. Loss also haunts Grace Trevethyn in *Saving Grace*. This occurs when her husband suddenly dies leaving Grace, not only with his debts, but also with the knowledge that he had a mistress. However, Honey Chambers, played by Diana Quick, aged fifty-four years at the time of the film's release, does challenge the stereotype of the mistress as the 'younger model'. Honey is presented as glamorous and flirtatious, in contrast with the, initially, rather dowdy and earnest Grace. Nevertheless, the inclusion of an older 'other woman' is itself a challenge to dominant sexual discourses about the asexual nature of mature women. When Grace confronts Honey about the relationship with her dead husband, it emerges that Grace's sex life had metaphorically died long before her husband was literally dead: 'He thought you weren't interested', Honey tells her. 'Well,' Grace responds, 'he was wrong'.

A combined total of sixteen British and Irish films affirm mature women as sexually active, or as inherently sexual beings. Overall, the affirmation of the sexually active mature women is more muted in Irish than in British film. Historically, as Ruth Barton and others have suggested, urban and rural Irish society has been characterized by sexual repression, particularly in relation to female sexuality (2004, p.115). Indeed, the only Irish film that proactively explores the theme of midlife sexuality, *Night Train*, is extremely tentative in its representation of female, or indeed male, sexuality.

Sexual Agency

While third-wave feminists reject 'the regulation of female sexuality' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, p. 137) and the 'limitations on what is considered appropriate behavior for each gender' (Redfern and Aune, 2010, p. 50) the focus is principally on young women and their concerns; ageing femininity has been, more or less, overlooked. Interestingly, five British films *The Mother*, *Calendar Girls*, *Keeping Mum, Ruby Blue* and *The Last Station* and one Irish film, *Come on Eileen* are concerned with the sexual agency of ageing femininity and depict the mature female character as either initiating or co-initiating sexual activity

May, the protagonist in *The Mother,* is the most forthright of all the characters in terms of her sexual needs. For instance, she initiates the kiss with Darren and, later, she asks him to 'come to the spare room'. In *Keeping Mum*, we also see Gloria take the sexual initiative, albeit with a comedic twist. Stephanie, in *Ruby Blue* (Josiane Balasko), pursues Jack (Bob Hoskins) patiently and persistently. Yet she is sensitive to the fact that he has been recently widowed. Eventually, as they lie in bed following (off-screen) sex, she reveals that she is transsexual, a revelation that temporarily fractures the relationship. The subsequent dramatic conflict relates to Jack's revulsion at engaging in a sexual act with a transsexual, rather than a mature woman. Arguably, the narrative does not shy away from engaging with mature female sexuality but the dramatic focus on Stephanie's transsexuality could be seen as a distraction from the former, similar to the role played by alcohol in *Come on Eileen.*

A further example of proactive female sexuality is demonstrated by Chris (Helen Mirren) in *Calendar Girls,* who is the driving force behind the nude calendar initiative. The film's interdiegetic action is prompted by the sudden eruption of midlife sexuality and we see the character embrace the opportunity for exhibitionism and adventure presented by modelling for the calendar. However, Chris becomes captivated by the media attention, resulting in the neglect of her friend Annie (Julie Walters) and family. Although played with a light comic touch, mature female sexuality is represented as potentially destabilizing. We learn that Chris is at 'a difficult age',

implying she is menopausal and liable to behave erratically. Ultimately, a conservative message underpins the narrative, Chris is reined back into family life as wife and mother, and her sexuality is once again under control.

In *The Last Station*, Sofya toys with her husband's sexuality. Her laugher conveys unbridled lust as she claps her hands in delight and revels in 'talking dirty' and tempting the chaste Tolstoy into her bed. 'I want you to love me', she tells him, and they kiss passionately. A drunken Eileen, in *Come on Eileen*, is equally sexually forthright as she starts to undress and gyrate, suggesting to her boyfriend, Bill, that they forget their argument and 'have it off'. However, Bill rejects her advances and goes home, repulsed by her excessive drinking.

A combined total of six British and Irish films from the period 1998-2011 portray mature female characters exhibiting sexual agency with very few negative consequences for the protagonists concerned. By the end of the film *The Mother,* May is on her own again but profoundly altered by her experience. As she packs her art supplies and her new clothes, we know she is embarking on a different phase of her life, rather than running away. While Chris in *Calendar Girls* is rather more conservatively depicted as 'coming to her senses' she is accepted back into her family and suffers no punishment in a narrative sense.

Similarly, Sofya (*The Last Station*) eventually loses her husband, who leaves the marital home because he cannot cope with her passionate outbursts. Nonetheless, a short time later on his deathbed, he asks for his wife, suggesting that he values her outspokenness and her passion. In the same way, Eileen (*Come on Eileen*) stops drinking and acknowledges that Bill was a good friend who made her face some harsh truths; the peace she ultimately experiences emanates from an acceptance that she cannot allow drink back into her life. Hence, we can, I think, positively conclude that most of the female characters who demonstrate sexual agency do not pay a price, narratively, for articulating, demonstrating and pursing their desire, though, arguably, only in *The Mother,* is this message not circumscribed in some way.

This may suggest the emergence of new discourses about mature female sexuality which posit a welcome and significant challenge to Catherine Redfern's and Kristin Aune's assertion that 'acting upon desires can bring opprobrium on women to which

men are rarely subject' (2010, p. 53). Such opprobrium is magnified in the case of the expression of mature female sexuality and, specifically, the expression of maternal sexuality (Varis, 2009; Montemurro and Siefken, 2012). Indeed, as Rosalind Gill observes (2007, p. 152), despite the growing sexualization of western culture 'only some women are constructed as active, desiring sexual subjects' and this does not typically include ageing women.

Sexual Boundaries

Two British films, *Keeping Mum* and *Being Julia,* represent women who seek sexual satisfaction in extra-marital relationships and ultimately suffer humiliation and betrayal. In the case of *Being Julia*, the younger man rejects Julia for a younger woman and she returns to her husband and a 'modern' marriage in which there is companionship, admiration and support, though not sexual passion or fidelity. The implication is that it is fortunate both characters have a loving family they *can* return to; and there are real dangers for women who stray from the matrimonial bed. That said, in *Undertaking Betty*, Betty, played by Brenda Blethyn, conceives a bizarre and comic plot to feign her death and run away from her husband with childhood sweetheart, Boris (Alfred Molina). Betty and Boris find happiness far away from their Welsh village and from Betty's confining and loveless marriage. However, this musical fantasy genre may render such escapades (by mature women, who should know better) more acceptable to an audience than if it were played as straight drama.

By contrast, Hollywood has traditionally sanctioned romantic relationships between older men and younger women**.**This brings to mind Susan Sontag's concept of the 'sexual disqualification' of ageing women whereby women's 'sexual value' and attractiveness 'drops' with age (Sontag, cited in Varis, 2009, p.512). Men, on the other hand, remain 'sexually eligible' into old age. Interestingly, and resonating with Sontag's observations, the male participants in Varis's audience response study to *The Mother* did not question their own sexual eligibility for women fourteen to twenty years *younger* than themselves. Unusually, then, four British films, *Saving Grace, The Mother*, *Being Julia*, *Ladies in Lavender* and two Irish films, *Agnes Brown* and

Come on Eileen challenge this ostensible norm by paring an older woman with a younger man; defined here as a male actor at least seven years younger than the mature female character.

Addressing the above point, in *Saving Grace*, there is no reference to an age difference between Jacques Chevalier and Grace Trevethan in the narrative. However, the actor, Tcheky Karyo, is seven years younger than Brenda Bleythn, thus bucking the trend identified by Doris Bazzini (Bazzini *et al*., 1997).

The age difference between May and Darren in *The Mother* is not problematized by either of these two characters. However, May's children, Paula and Bobby (Steven Mackintosh) do voice their disgust at their mother's active sexuality, primarily because Darren is a much younger man. Yet Paula is happy to introduce her mother to Bruce, a widower nearer her own age. Bruce, played by Oliver Ford Davies, was sixty-four years old at the time of the film's release. The resulting sexual encounter is distasteful to May and in stark contrast to her sexual experience with Darren. Thus, while youth is still privileged in that Bruce is older than Darren, in this film it is at the expense of the older man, rather than the older woman. May indicates that she will pay for Darren to travel the world with her, but never professes, or seeks, a declaration of love or intent because, for May, this is a relationship based on friendship and sexual desire. Indeed, May's position could be interpreted as a reversal of the 'Sugar Daddy' stereotype in which an older man offers financial incentives to a, usually, much younger woman, in exchange for sexual favours.

By contrast, *Being Julia* offers a cautionary note to older women thinking of engaging sexually with younger men. Julia falls in love with Tom Fennel although he betrays her for a young starlet, Avice (Lucy Punch), and later cruelly denies his sexual involvement with Julia, declaring 'she's old enough to be my mother.' Furthermore, when Julia tells her friend Charles (Bruce Greenwood) that she is considering doing a play about an older woman and a younger man, he assumes the play will be a farce: 'Everyone laughs at the older woman' he warns, registering social assumptions about the bias against such a union.

Alternatively, in *Agnes Brown*, Agnes is asked out on a date by Pierre and an age difference, while implied, is never referenced in the narrative.[5] However, Agnes's perceived role as a mother takes precedence over a sexual relationship. Similarly in *Come on Eileen*, the narrative does reference the age difference between Eileen and Bill. This is highlighted when Gipsy (Mercedes Grower) Eileen's daughter, jokes that her mother 'nabbed the only young one' from the cricket club and Bill playfully refers to Eileen as 'the old girl'. The narrative implies that, in this context, her insecurity has no substance in reality, but can be explained with reference to mature women internalising a cultural fear and disgust about ageing (Cruikshank, 2003, p.153). Further, Eileen's fears can be explained with reference to Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony (Bocock, 1986). What it means to be a mature woman or a mother, for instance, often appears self-evident and rooted in common sense. Middle-aged women have not traditionally been encouraged to define themselves as sexual beings and can internalize the assumptions of a (patriarchal) culture.

A combined total of six out of seventeen British and Irish films include a female character who is younger than the male romantic interest, whether this is referenced in the narrative or not. However, only *one* of these non-traditional relationships survives; a commentary, perhaps, on perceived cultural expectations. That said, five of the six female characters do experience something positive as a result of their relationship. May (*The Mother*) rediscovers a curiosity about life as result of meeting Darren and is reawakened sexually; Julia (*Being Julia*) takes revenge on Tom by upstaging her younger rival, Avice, by triumphantly delivering a powerful *tour-de-force*. And Agnes, in *Agnes Brown*, is reminded that there is love and romance in the world, even if she chooses not to experience it. Less happily, it could be said that Julia suffers the imposed loss of sexual passion and is ultimately 'alone' *despite* remaining in a companionable marriage. In *Ladies in Lavender* Ursula's emotional arc is not satisfactorily explored and the narrative concludes with little indication of how the experience has impacted on her interior world or how it will shape the rest of her life.

[5] The date of birth for actor Arno Chevrier is unavailable but Pierre is positioned as a younger man within the narrative.

Sexual Being

Two British films, *Ladies in Lavender* and *Notes on a Scandal* depict a mature female character experiencing sexual desire but unable to consummate that desire. Within these films, neither Ursula nor Barbara, both played by Judi Dench, engage in overt sexual activity. *Ladies in Lavender* is set in Cornwall, 'the passionate periphery' (Westland cited in Moseley, 2010, p.78). The protagonist, Ursula, implies she has never had a sexual relationship, yet in her dreams, a young Ursula rolls in the grass with Andreas, the young man she has helped rescue from the sea. Like Sofya in *The Last Station*, Ursula's yearning is also articulated by the releasing of her long, unruly hair; a gesture that is culturally interpreted in the West as the action of a temptress (Weitz, 2004, p.4). Furthermore, the act of unpinning and shaking loose a cascade of long hair is more often associated in cinema with young, sexually available, women. However, the only sexual expression open to Ursula, given the cultural constraints on older female sexuality, is touching the boy's hair and face as he sleeps.

In *Notes on a Scandal,* Barbara's longing for Sheeba is palpable within the fleeting glances and carefully measured voice-over but her lesbian sexuality is represented as thwarted and perverse, reminiscent of 'the monstrous feminine' described by Barbara Creed in relation to the horror film genre (1993, pp. 154-155). Barbara's sexual yearning is implied in the desiring gaze directed at Sheeba's body as she dances uninhibitedly. Later, Barbara tells Sheeba that when she was a girl, they used to 'stroke each other' when a friend 'was a bit down'. Ignoring Sheeba's reluctance, Barbara runs her hands over the younger woman's arm and Sheeba recoils.

At the end of the film, without any analysis of her repressed needs, Barbara is doomed to repeat the same patterns over again. Ultimately, the narrative does not offer either Ursula or Barbara the opportunity to reflect and grow from their experience. Yet *Ladies in Lavender*, *Notes on a Scandal* and *The Last Station* are subversive in their acknowledgement that older women *do* have sexual feelings. Age does not obliterate sexual desire; however much it may limit the articulation of that desire because of the internalization of 'societal messages, myths and norms about aging women's sexuality' (Browne, 1999, p.40).

Maternal Sexuality

Dafna Leamish and Varda Muhlbauer argue that the marginalisation of older women by gender and age is linked to the dominant dichotomy in representations of women in patriarchal culture; the 'Madonna' and the 'whore' (2012, p. 169). As the Madonna, women are the selfless mothers, the nurturers and care-givers. As the whore, they are the sex objects, at once desirous and threatening to men. 'Motherhood is perceived as asexual and sexy women are rarely portrayed as mothers. Hence, femininity is defined primarily by these two roles; exactly the same two roles presumed to be lost by older women' (Leamish and Muhlbauer, 2012, p. 169).

Tally's research on American cinema has uncovered a number of recent films that partially break the representational mould and present us with characters who are mothers and sexual beings (2006, p.52). A similar annexing of motherhood and sexuality emerges in a small handful of British and Irish films produced between 1998 and 2011. For example, in *Keeping Mum* and *Mamma Mia!* the daughters of the protagonists, Holly and Sophie, (Tamsin Egerton and Amanda Seyfried, respectively), do not balk when they make discoveries about their mother's sexual life. In *Mamma Mia!,* it is Sophie's mother, Donna, who is concerned that she will appear sexually permissive to her child, though this is never an issue for Sophie. Moreover, by the end of the film, Donna marries one of Sophie's possible fathers (Pierce Brosnan) and is poised to embark on another sexual relationship suggesting the compatibility of sexuality and motherhood.

However, in the Irish film *Agnes Brown,* Agnes is defined as a mother first and foremost. The sexually vibrant woman who is buried within her is acknowledged not only in the sensuous dance discussed previously but in the humorous but sexually frank conversation with her friend Marion (Marion O'Dwyer). Agnes suggests that 'organisms' do not actually exist but Marion assures her that they do and that she herself has experienced them on two occasions. Agnes muses that she has seven children 'and not an organism to show for it'. However, an active sexual life would threaten the stability of her family and must be kept in check, suggestive of Tally's work on 'toxic' motherhood (2008, p.130).

A sexual relationship with Pierre is rejected and friendship is all that Agnes is prepared to offer him. Her role as a mother must take priority. Thus she tells Pierre: 'All I have now is me kids. I have to make sure they grow up right'. Social expectations regarding the role of the mother have been internalized by Agnes and her sexual desire usurped, echoing Beth Montemurro's and Jenna Marie Siefken's (2012, p.2) observation that when a woman has children she must primarily act as an example and be responsible and conservative in a culturally specific way. For instance, in an Irish context, traditionally, the mother figure has been 'devoted and a-sexual, her own desires subsumed into the maternal' (Barton, 2004, p.114).

Conclusion

Weitz suggests that 'foreign films have the reputation of portraying midlife female sexuality more positively than US films' (2010, p. 21) and calls for further research to determine 'whether this reputation is justified' (p.21). The analysis of British and Irish film narratives did indeed uncover a number of striking similarities on both sides of the Atlantic suggesting, perhaps, an unconscious resistance to representing the sexuality of older women, a resistance that may be partially understood by applying Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject (1982, p.4). In accordance with Weitz's findings, a small number of British and Irish films offer mature female sexuality conditional support, within certain parameters. With one exception, marriage or romantic love is implicitly identified as the appropriate forum for a mature character to express her sexuality. The representation of active mature female sexuality is restrained and, in many cases, limited to a kiss. Moreover, even if mature female characters are depicted as sexually active, the mature female body is usually hidden from view.

As with Weitz's findings, a number of older women have relationships with younger men, though they are inevitably short-lived. The mature female characters in US, British and Irish film are white, middle-class and slim (though not 'fashionably' thin). Similarly, many films which feature sexually active mature female characters have a comedic thrust, such as the Irish film *Agnes Brown*. Indeed five British films are comedies and another film, *Irina Palm*, arguably a straight drama, was *marketed* as a comedy, perhaps suggesting that mature female sexuality may be more palatable

when couched in comedic terms. That said, there is a greater emotional range across the British and Irish films and, unlike the US sample, the majority have a female protagonist driving the narrative.

Overall, the films in my corpus affirm the sexuality of midlife and older women (including maternal sexuality) and validate the sexual pleasure and sexual agency of mature female characters over forty-five years of age. While there is still evidence of a 'narrower range of behaviour considered cinematically appropriate for ageing women' (Markson and Taylor, 2000, p.157), a small number of British and Irish films are challenging hegemonic definitions of older women as asexual. These more progressive narratives are important because, when mature female sexuality is absent from the screen, it can make a powerful statement, naturalizing the invisibility of older women's sexuality and even rendering it taboo. Lauzen and Dozier suggest that 'the worth' of characters is symbolically communicated by their absence or abundance on screen and by the quality of their portrayals (2005, p. 438). The marginalization of mature women in film has widely been accepted as inevitable, explained away as being part and parcel of the demands of commercial cinema; 'just the way it is'.

Kim Kjaersgaard suggests that people need 'rich images of diverse possibilities from which to imagine and weave their own tapestry of life' (2003, p.208). Certainly, we need new narratives of ageing; new stories of vibrant, sexually active mature female protagonists if we are to mine the rich possibilities of our long and complex lives. A small but consistent stream of British and Irish films are providing a limited ideological challenge to the hegemonic representation of mature women as asexual; films in which mature women can have sexual desires, can act on those desires, can forge sexual relations with younger men and remain sexually vibrant through their lives. While acknowledging that all sexual behaviour is framed within patriarchal parameters, these narratives are important and significant because they challenge the binary that sexual passion belongs to the young and celibacy is the inevitable gateway to old age.

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STILL WORKING: PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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ABSTRACT

This photographic essay explores a series of photographs which are concerned with the representation, identity, and invisibility of older working women in the United Kingdom. It contextualizes the social and cultural environment in which these photographs were taken and offers a critique of the media landscape in which visual images of older women are scarce. The project *Still Working* offers older women the kind of visibility that has so far been so rare.

KEY WORDS

Photography; Older Women; Working; Retirement

Introduction

Still Working is a series of photographic portraits that are concerned with the representation, identity and invisibility of older working women. This work was made in response to a commission from Solihull Gallery, Birmingham in 2012 and challenges the notion that women past retirement age are no longer working. The invisibility of older women, due to ageism, and the supposition that older women are inactive have inspired this project. The series consists of 12 photographic portraits of women, over the age of 60, who were employed either in a paid or voluntary capacity in Solihull. Underpinning the photographic work is a body of evidence that provides the rationale for the project. This includes issues relating to the invisibility of older women in the media and the relevance of Freudian psychoanalysis. This photographic essay explores the images taken for *Still Working* through this framework.

Rationale

Older women and the realities of their ageing are culturally invisible as indicated by a steady flow of writing from older female authors over the last 10 years including: Athill (2008), Bakewell (2006), Miller (2010), and Neuberger (2008). Individually they

present differing reflections on the challenges that life presents to them as an older female. Apart from Neuberger their writing is primarily a reflection on older life, but Neuberger goes much further by presenting a manifesto for old age that has 10 demands including: 'Don't make assumptions about my age,' (pp.21-49) 'Don't waste my skills and experience,' (pp.50-76) and 'Don't take my pride away' (pp.77-104). These 3 demands are very relevant when considering the cultural invisibility of older women.

The dismissive treatment of older women is particularly apparent in visual culture and most noted within the media that tries very hard to exclude the face and body of the older woman. As Bond et al (2007) state, 'Almost all studies on older people in the media have found that they are not well covered whether in popular films, TV series or advertisements', (p.241). This issue is further highlighted by the results of the 2010 survey commissioned by Anchor Housing Trust to explore the actual and perceived presence of older people on terrestrial television programmes. The results showed that the underrepresentation of over 50 year olds was particularly marked for female compared with male television presenters, and cast members, and was apparent on the 4 premier television channels. Many women over the age of 50, working in media roles, have been dismissed from their posts because of ageism while men, such as David Dimbleby, are allowed to carry on well into their seventies. Some of the women such as Miriam O' Reilly, who was removed from Country File, have sued the BBC for unfair dismissal and won. But despite these landmark cases the number of older women presenting television programmes and thus representing the older woman on screen has hardly changed. It is this attitude to older women that originally inspired *Still Working*.

The benchmark age of 60 was chosen for this project because in 2012 the retirement age for women in the UK was in the process of changing from 60 to 65 in 2018, and to 66 by 2020 when the retirement age for women will become the same as men. So why, when women will be working as long as men, are they still invisible? The reasons for this are complex and are based on a perception of how older women are seen. A perception of the ageing women was noted by Beauvoir (1978), in her writing about old age, when she noted:

> As men see it, a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object, when she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a 'monstrum' that excites revulsion and even dread (p.184).

It is this perception of the older woman as a 'monstrum' that renders her invisible and removes her authority. But why should an older woman be seen in this way? The answer, to some extent, can be gauged by the absence of the older woman in Freudian psychoanalysis, a fact that has been noted by Woodward (1995), and others. One of the many reasons for this absence is highlighted within Freudian scopophilia where the active male gaze is only for the younger, more sexually attractive woman. As Mulvey (1988) points out 'the male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly,' (p.11).

If the older woman is not the object of the active male gaze she must therefore be seen, as Beauvoir points out, with disgust. Feminist gaze theory therefore goes some way towards explaining why television companies favour young, attractive female newsreaders and presenters. Older people, however, are becoming annoyed by the lack of representation of older women in the media, an issue raised by Harriet Harman (2010) in her article 'Where are the wellderly women?' Harman argues that there is nothing wrong with seeing older women on television screens and she is concerned that television does not allow women to age. Harman urges media channels to take up the challenge of encouraging and allowing more older women onto our screens.

Still Working

In this series women between the ages of 60, and 91, who were working or volunteering in Solihull Birmingham in 2012 are represented. Twelve women were photographed in their place of work across a range of locations including the supermarket and the hospital. They were all photographed confronting their audience, looking into the lens and out of the picture. This stance compels the viewer to look back at them and to become a voyeur into their places of work.



(Image 1: Cynthia, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Cynthia was photographed in the meeting room at Age UK. When this photograph was taken in 2012 Cynthia was aged 91. She was working, in a volunteer role, as a deputy director and trustee of Age UK Solihull. She was also on the finance sub-committee overseeing the smooth running of the organisation in terms of finance, staffing and services. In addition she was involved in a care housing association, a nursing home and several sheltered housing schemes. In her 80s she received a MBE for services to the voluntary sector. When Prince Charles presented her with this award, he asked her “When are you going to give up?” She replied, “I am not, I am going to die in my tracks!”



(Image 2: Irene, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Irene was 83 when photographed and worked as a bakery assistant in Morrisons during the day, and afterwards she moved onto her evening work as a cleaner for Solihull Borough Council. Irene said “I feel good working at my age, I wouldn’t want to stay at home. I like meeting people and getting on with everyday things.” She loved selling bread and had a good relationship with many of her customers who knew her by name. Some of them saw her photograph in Solihull Gallery and afterwards came into the supermarket for her autograph, commenting that she was now a film star!



(Image 3: Mary, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Mary, who was also over 80, was a volunteer at Solihull Hospital. Her job was to meet and greet people coming to Out-Patients and to show them to the appropriate waiting room. She did this job because she enjoyed helping people out and thought that members of the public appreciate a friendly face, especially as when most people who come into the hospital are worried and disorientated.



(Image 4: Irene, from *Still Working* © Vicky Hodgson, 2012)

Finally Irene aged 73, the Mayor and first citizen of Solihull in 2012 photographed here in the Mayor's chamber. Irene was Mayor from May 2011-May 2012. In this role Irene represented the Borough on civic occasions and was a figurehead for the community. During her year in office she entertained many groups in the Mayor's chamber including groups of deaf people, blind people and children from Chernobyl. The most poignant event of her year was laying a wreath on remembrance Sunday. In May 2012 she returned to her role as a councillor.

Conclusion

The project *Still Working*, although based on a small sample of women, has illustrated the need for many older women to be engaged in work and to be more visible. Also, as it has been seen, they make a valuable contribution to their local communities and to the economy. The talent and expertise of so many older women goes unnoticed and many more opportunities need to be made available for them. The women photographed in this series willingly volunteered and were only too happy to be involved in the project as they considered the exposure of older women and their work to be important.

This series of photographs has given these women the visual exposure that is so badly needed in order for older women to have an equal role in society with older men. It is also possible that raising the profile of older women will influence the prestige of younger women, as The Old Women's Project (2010) suggests:

> Ageism is a central issue for women, because as long as they are erased in the last third of their lives, women will continue to have a perilous footing during the other two thirds.

Younger women need more positive, visible role models of older women to look up to and admire and the women photographed for *Still Working* have, in a small way, helped to provide them.

Notes:

Still Working was exhibited at Solihull Gallery, Birmingham from 17th September to 17th November 2012 and at Brighton Photo Fringe from 22nd October to 3rd November 2012.

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EVENT REVIEW: WOMEN ON AIR CONFERENCE, CITY UNIVERSITY, LONDON, FRIDAY 4TH APRIL 2014

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ABSTRACT

Event review of the Women on Air Conference, City University London Friday April 4th 2014. Organisers: Centre for Law, Justice and Journalism/Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

Two years after The Expert Women campaign was launched by the broadcasting industry to increase the number of women heard on TV and radio, male experts still outnumber female experts on the flagship news programmes by four to one.

Lis Howells, director of Broadcasting at City University presented the findings of her parallel research project into BBC News at 10, Channel 4 News, ITV News at 10 and Sky News's evening bulletins at this event. Howells described them as 'pretty depressing on the whole'. She found that the BBC had the fewest of all when the number of reporters, presenters and expert interviewees were added together.

The figures presented are stark:

- Most women interviewed for news programmes are not experts, most men are
- Male experts speak for longer than females
- There are 3 times as many male reporters as female
- Ten times as many male experts are interviewed on politics as women

And:

- 71% of expert women surveyed said they lacked self confidence, feared criticism and were worried about appearing 'pushy'.

The figures for older women working on TV are 'depressing' according to BBC News' Education Editor and former presenter Penny Marshall. The survey found that

only 7% of female presenters are aged between 50 and 64 and the younger panelists felt this was not going to change during their careers; Cordelia Lynch from Channel 4 news said she felt she had a ‘shelf life’ and needed to achieve what she wanted to ‘before the age of 40’.

The conference was opened by former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Dame Tessa Jowell MP. Among a distinguished list of panelists at the event were Dame Carol Black, Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, Caroline Criado-Perez founder of ‘The Women’s Room’ and Anne Morrison, Director of the BBC Academy.

Tessa Jowell described the research findings as ‘absolutely devastating’ but congratulated Lis Howellls on her work, saying this study means that ‘no one will be allowed to forget it’.

The campaign has been closely monitored by the BBC Director General Tony Hall and has drawn a great deal of attention on social media and in the press, so its research team hope the they have made enough impact to force real change.