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Response to “Back in the Saddle Again”

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Abstract

Response to commentary, “Back in the Saddle: Ethics, Visibility, and Aging on Screen,” by Maruta Z. Vitols and Caitrin Lynch in this issue of *Anthropology & Aging* Vol36, no.1 pp. 11-21.

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Response to “Back in the Saddle Again”

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The premise of this piece is important, mainly that filmic portrayals of aging and old age are not just whimsical tongue-in-cheek, back-patting celebrations of Hollywood by (and for) its “senior” stars. Rather, attention to representations of old age and aging in films exposes stereotypes regarding the elderly and unrealistic attitudes towards the aging process more generally. Even though showcasing action heroes/heroines, boxers and ex-CIA agents (they’re always coming out of retirement!) in roles whereby wisdom and experience are used to outwit their younger counterparts bodes well for revising caricatures of the feeble and doting old person, the authors of “Back in the Saddle Again” point to a more subtle affront. In their words, they are “[...] concerned with the politics of the erasure of multi-dimensional portrayals of older adults as human beings” and—well to put it matter-of-factly—normal aging and all its “invisible” challenges. While it’s good (and entertaining) to be reminded that some of the dinosaurs can still dance, films and more specifically blockbusters which reach a large audience do more harm than good. The authors argue that films, as instruments of mass media, often deny, invalidate and depoliticize the experience of aging, dignity in the human condition, and subjectivities in the making. I would like to begin by calling attention to two main topics that should appeal to academic readers, namely the politics of aging and critical gerontology.

The authors mention that filmic representations occupy a space (whether public, private, or post-post-neoliberal is up for debate) where Arendt’s political theories regarding the visual take shape. The myths and narratives about aging are often reinforced by particular images and the technologies that enable them. If the authors are right, then there is no banality; rather, visualizing youth and vigor banishes the atrocity and reality of conventional biological aging from the realm of the “visual.” The second topic worthy of more research is the possible return to critical gerontology. The philosophy and praxis of the Frankfurt School (e.g., Adorno and his critique of the culture industry) helped to shape the field of critical gerontology in the early-mid 1990s. During this period, gerontologists were scratching their heads and wondering why earlier theorists had not written more about aging and the vulnerability of the elderly in light of the structures and logic of capitalism. In anticipation of the baby-boomers and an evolving political economy of aging, the critique of capitalism could potentially benefit from a recasting told from the point of view of the elderly and vice versa. Perhaps film and the film industry is a good starting point from the perspective of a critical gerontology by way of mass media, consumption, and communication theory.

In the spirit of dialogue, I would like to offer the authors a few questions:

- 1) Recognizing the limitations of an article (for its length and scope), and given that there are so many film genres and types, what is the analytical value in

comparing two "blow'em up" movies and a documentary? Is this a case of apples and oranges? What makes documentaries more or less the products of mass media, and what does this say about the documentaries' agency on rendering aging (in)visible?

- 2) What are the real motivations for making movies like R.E.D., The Expendables, Danny Collins, Last Vegas, etc.? Is it merely profits or is there something symbolic and cultural worth uncovering systematically? Maybe, there is something beyond the power relations in Hollywood (cf. Hortense Powdermaker's "The Factory of Dreams"), i.e. something mythic about the human journey and our representational tropes.
- 3) If action heroes already defy what is possible for the body to achieve (film watching requires suspension of disbelief), then doesn't it make sense that we still want our gun-toting heroes (no matter how old they are)? Why do we need them, and furthermore, why can't we allow these film characters to act upon their nostalgic reminiscing in the ways they have always known and done (once a fighter always a fighter)?
- 4) There seems to be a dichotomy between visible/invisible and the body/mind. To play the role of the contrarian why is it not possible for us to view these films benignly as metaphors rather than as products of mass media/societal deception and conspiracy?
- 5) The authors that "Public speech in the form of a filmic presence is not sufficient for concrete political and social change" (17). Was this ever in doubt (I'm thinking of the movie Selma and the ongoing crisis of racism in America)? To come full circle again, and to be fair to the authors, they mention the political agency and distribution of socially meaningful documentaries, which brings me back to the question: Do people really think that they (and others) are supposed to age like Rambo?

Some but not all filmic representations, however ambivalent and pernicious, will inevitably do more than just reflect society's norms. The authors argue convincingly that untenable fictions and expectations of our aging loved ones and future selves are at stake. There is one silver-lining, however, stemming from the effects of the aging baby-boomers and their consumerism, and that lesson was aptly captured in the "classic" 1980s movie Cocoon. The aging protagonists stumble upon an indoor swimming pool with regenerative powers. When a new owner purchases the clubhouse and closes down the pool as a result, the following exchange takes place between two of the older men:

Joseph Finley: Maybe they could give us permission to use the pool. We could pay them something.

Art Selwyn: It wouldn't be fun if we had permission.

There is something to be said for breaking the rules, and not going gently into that good night.