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# Ghosted Images: Old Lesbians on Screen

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*Screen images of old lesbians combine modes of representing female gender, lesbian sexuality and old age, all of which contain layers of otherness within a hetero-patriarchal and youth-centered society. Analyzing a range of films, from independent to mainstream cinema, this article explores how the ghosted lesbian paradigm intersects with narratives of aging as decline in representations of lesbian characters who are over the age of sixty. The spectral matters of illness, death, mourning and widowhood inevitably culminate in an unhappy ending. Removed from a lesbian community context, intergenerational continuity vanishes and the old lesbian emerges as the cultural other.*

*KEYWORDS* aging; lesbian images; popular culture; ghosted; aging as decline; visibility

## INTRODUCTION

Images of the older lesbian woman can be categorized according to earlier stereotypical modes of representing lesbians in film, as grotesque, predatory or as de-sexualized apparitional figures.[1] This article explores the continuity of the ghosted lesbian image in representations of older lesbian women on screen, conceptualizing this analysis through Castle's (1993)[2] apparitional lesbian. According to Castle, the lesbian is generally "'ghosted' – or made to seem invisible – by culture itself" (1993, pp. 4-5), while lesbianism "can only be represented to the degree that it is simultaneously 'derealized,' through a blanching authorial infusion of spectral metaphors. [...] One woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one. Passion is excited, only to be obscured, disembodied, decarnalized. The vision is inevitably waved off" (1993, p. 34).

The sample of films considered in this article, all containing one or more lesbian characters who appear aged sixty or above, include a range of nationalities and production contexts – UK production *Hold Back the Night* (Davis, 1999), HBO television film *If These Walls Could Talk 2* (Anderson, Coolidge, & Heche, 2000), mainstream USA production *The Shipping News* (Hallström, 2001), two independent lesbian-themed films *Hannah Free* (Carlton, 2009) and *Cloudburst* (Fitzgerald, 2011), and the deleted scenes of romantic comedy *Love Actually* (Curtis, 2003). Focusing on the thematic continuities in the representation of old/er lesbian characters highlights a specific pattern of storylines involving terminal illness, mourning and widowhood, with a seemingly inevitable unhappy ending. The lesbian character tends to be represented outside a lesbian- or LGBT-community[3] and without any friends who are also lesbians, placed within a heteronormative context. Intersecting with the narrative of aging as decline (Gullette, 2004), the old lesbian is made ghostly as a result of the spectral themes of illness and death, and the experience of mourning and widowhood. Through the guise of old age, the systematic erasure of lesbian characters gains a new level of cultural acceptability, making the "ghosted" old lesbian the most visible cultural representation.

OLD LESBIAN IN/VISIBILITY AND COMMUNITY

Older LGBT individuals have been described as a community without a generation, segregated, kept apart and socially and culturally invisible as a result of a multiplicity of exclusions as well as self-imposed anonymity (see Pugh, 2002). An analysis of cinematic portrayals of older lesbian women on screen implies they are women without a generation or a community. Sexism, heteronormativity and ageism intersect resulting in what has been described as a triple jeopardy or triple bind for women who are also lesbian and old (Poor, 1982).

Several authors have previously denounced ageism within the woman's rights movement (Macdonald & Rich, 1984) as well as within increasingly youth-oriented lesbian communities (Copper, 1997; Fullmer, Shenk, & Eastland, 1999; Poor, 1982). Poor (1982) and Fullmer *et al.* (1999) explore the issue of aging lesbian invisibility within the lesbian community and the consequences for young and old lesbians alike. Copper (1997, p. 123) believes old lesbians need to be represented and perceived "as sexual, attractive, useful, integral parts of the woman-loving world." Poor (1982, p. 166) laments the lack of visible role models, the lack of lesbian "models for aging." Fullmer *et al.* (1999, p. 140) state that older lesbians feel "alienated from the youth-oriented lesbian culture" and conclude that lesbians are "clearly not immune to the influences of a sexist, ageist culture" (1999, p140). Contemporary cultural representations confirm that "lesbian youth worship differs little from heterosexual youth worship" (Copper, 1997, p. 131), as indicated by our current Western postfeminist landscape, where lesbian visibility is reduced to youthful, glamorous, (hetero)sexualized lesbian characters.[4]

Postfeminist cultural representations seem to combine ageist tendencies, the commodification of gay culture and a generalized de-politicization of the figure of the lesbian (see Hamer & Budge, 1994). If "[l]esbian feminism offered women a positive lesbian identity within a close-knit community of women" (Roseneil, 2002, p. 26), this is lost within the increasingly commercialized and sexualized context lesbians are represented today. Commodification precludes the notion of a lesbian community – "within the world of gay window advertising, there is no lesbian community to come out to, no lesbian community to identify with, no indication that lesbianism or 'lesbian style' is a political issue" (Clark, 1991, p. 193).

In this scenario, lesbian women are isolated from a group or community, they are separated from a previous generation, on-screen and off, losing access to a wealth of support and other resources which a community provides (Heath & Mulligan, 2008). The knowledge of a

previous generation is lost: "[a]s middle-aged lesbians, we have seen a lot. [...] we have an opportunity to change ourselves and to have a part of that change spill over into our community" (Loulan, 1991, p. 17). The absence of older lesbians and the segregation between old and young prevents generational continuity, which is essential to lesbian identity construction, as Adelman suggests:

> We are at once, generation to generation, each other's future and past. Disconnected from each other, we lesbians are held prisoners of heterosexual society's perception of us. We are unable to shape our own community and individual identities. But aware of our past and intergenerationally connected we can better shape and understand ourselves in the present – and we can better shape for ourselves and those who follow a more secure future.
>
> (1986, p. 15)

Cultural perceptions and stereotypes can also have an impact on gerontological and social services literature, when assumptions are made based on heteronormative stereotypes of gay loneliness and isolation: "the reality is that older lesbians and gay men do have vibrant social lives that involve mutual support and, as individuals, they gain a great deal from these support networks that enrich their lives" (Pugh, 2005, p. 212).

Goldberg *et al.*'s (2005) research similarly highlights the importance of female friendships among elder lesbians, who establish and maintain friendships with other lesbian women, some of them younger. Goldberg *et al.*'s social survey data also shows that more than half of the women interviewed belong to a lesbian-only or lesbian/gay groups in their communities (2005, p. 199).

In terms of cultural representations of a lesbian community, *Go Fish* (Troche, 1994) is frequently cited as an example of how a film can address, presume and construct a lesbian community (see Henderson, 1999). Lisa Henderson (1999) suggests that *Go Fish* provides its viewers with "the simple pleasure of keeping company with lesbian characters" (p. 38). A more recent example is *Itty Bitty Titty Committee* (Babbit, 2007), which portrays a group of young bisexual, lesbian and queer characters interacting as part of an activist community. A

variety of different lesbian characters enables viewers to experience the "quantitative effect of a merely additive change" (Sedgwick, 2006, p. xxi), "where no single character, relationship, or issue need be 'the lesbian one'" (p. xxiv).

When analyzing contemporary screen depictions of old lesbian characters, an opposing picture emerges. Characters are generally depicted alone, no friendships with other lesbian women are established, no intergenerational encounters are allowed and the concept of a lesbian community is absent. This means the simple pleasure of self-recognition and belonging (Henderson, 1999) or the possibility of generational continuity (Adelman, 1986) is denied to older and younger lesbian women seeking out images of themselves. In cultural and gender studies it is generally accepted that without the confirmation that mainstream visibility confers to bodies, groups and identities, certain images remain unseen and linger in the margins of cultural existence, remain outside "the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible" (Fuss, 1991, p. 4).

Another relevant feature of old lesbian representation consists of the return of the tragic element traditionally associated to lesbian-themed cinema (Ahmed, 2009; Russo, 1987), now under the guise of the narrative of decline. The tragic lesbian storyline has been one of the key continuities of lesbian representation (see Beirne, 2012), from the 1960s with *The Children's Hour* (Wyler, 1961), up to the 1990s with *Boys on the Side* (Ross, 1995) and the 2000s, with *Things You Can Tell Just By Looking at Her* (García, 2000) and *Lost and Delirious* (Pool, 2001), all of which include the death of a lesbian character.

The intersection of the tragic lesbian storyline with the narrative of aging as decline results in representations thwarted by heterosexist and ageist undertones. My critique of the lesbian narrative of decline does not entail a denial of illness, death and the experience of widowhood;[5] the problem here is a systematic reduction of all lesbian storylines involving the experience of aging to a dramatic story of decline. Margaret Cruikshank correctly

highlighted that one of the key stereotypes of age is equating late life with illness (Cruikshank, 2009, p. 152).

In what follows I analyze to what degree these films reflect and perpetuate the apparitional lesbian in line with Castle's axiom "[o]ne woman or the other must be a ghost, or on the way to becoming one" (1993, p. 34), resulting in ghosted old lesbians without a community.

## GHOSTED IMAGES

*Love Actually*

*Love Actually* is a British romantic comedy which deploys multiple characters and intersecting storylines supposedly exploring the universality of love in all its forms. I say supposedly, because the only lesbian relationship to be found is in the deleted scenes on the DVD version, which illustrates the paradoxical nature of the ghostly lesbian's "visible invisibility" in our digital age, not unlike the ghostly matters described by Avery Gordon which give "notice that something is missing" (1997, p15) and declare "I see you are not there" (1997, p. 16).

The lesbian storyline consists of three brief scenes, the first an intimate, domestic chat about dinner plans, followed by a close-up of the two women lying side by side in their bed. In this instance, the image of two older lesbian women is desexualized through the depiction of terminal illness, most likely cancer, as Geraldine's (Frances de la Tour) headscarf implies, in addition to her persistent cough which keeps them both awake. In the third and final scene, Geraldine has passed away – leaving the viewer with a final image of the widow (Anne Reid) in a gray jacket and dark sunglasses. Watching these deleted scenes in sequence, uninterrupted by other storylines, heightens the tragic progression from illness to death and from caregiver to widow; Geraldine's decline is instantaneous and her death abrupt. *Love Actually* illustrates the double erasure of difference, combining the "systematic trend of

lesbian erasure" (Carroll, 2008, p. 358) with the general tendency of making the aging female body disappear: "first we see it, then we don't" (Woodward, 2006, p. 163).

*Hold Back the Night*

*Hold Back the Night* centers on Vera (Sheila Hancock), an army veteran in her sixties, who picks up two teenagers, Charleen (Christine Tremarco) and Declan (Stuart Sinclair Blyth), who are on the run from the police. Together this unlikely trio set off to Scotland. *Hold Back the Night* combines various "ghostly matters": widowhood, mourning and terminal illness. In this case, we observe what Laura Cottingham describes as "a priori disappearance" (1996, p. 27), a narrative device which contains "the possibilities for lesbian content from the outset by presenting only one lesbian-like character so that 'the lesbian' is given no one to be a lesbian with" (1996, p. 27).

Within a youth-centered cultural context, where age is the "overdetermined signifier" (Dittmar, 1997, p70), the single or widowed older lesbian is visible as an older woman first and foremost, and thus more likely perceived as asexual. Vera eventually "comes out" as a lesbian to her travel companions – she is dying and wishes to watch a last sunset from the Ring of Brodgar, in honor of her deceased partner, Jo. Vera's revelation of her terminal illness immediately shifts the focus from her lesbian identity to her identity as an older woman in decline – a ghosted lesbian.

To understand possible meanings ascribed to and produced by terminal illness plotlines, the broader context of media representation has to be taken into account. Some authors argue there is a link between the representation of death and the construction of otherness (Bronfen, 1993; Elias, 1985; Hallam, Hockey, & Howarth, 1999). The biological changes of an aging body "in decline" provoke "anxieties about the integrity of the body as it faces destruction" (Hallam, et al., 1999, p. 21) which can be appeased through relegating them onto the "other." Markson (2003, p. 95) argues that the image of the dying older woman "provides a model

against which spectators can perform a self-assessment, reassuring themselves of their own wholeness by projecting their fears of aging and death outward." Others have argued that the death of the "other" in film should be interpreted as an assertion of heteronormative control (see Doane, 1991; Weiss, 1992). The "killing-off" of an older lesbian character certainly combines a variation of these processes of erasure.

The older lesbian character carries layers of otherness and suffers the effects of underlying heterosexism and ageism. The link between old age and death permeates contemporary cultural representations, including lesbian-themed and lesbian produced images, as HBO's *If These Walls Could Talk 2* demonstrates.[6]

*These Walls Could Talk 2*

Comprising three stories, each portraying one lesbian couple, *Walls 2* depicts a progress narrative (Heller, 2002) from silence and lack of visibility (in the past) to acceptance and the attainment of civil rights for lesbians (in the present). Of interest in this context is the film's first segment, "1961": Edith (Vanessa Redgrave) and Abby (Marian Seldes) are retired schoolteachers, whose long-term relationship is lovingly portrayed in the first few minutes of the film. Seven minutes into the film, Abby suffers an accident and is hospitalized, while Edith is confined to the visitors' lounge, being denied visiting rights. The plot revolves around the absence of property and other rights and depicts Edith's vulnerability when Abby's nephew and his family claim ownership of the couple's home. Each of these tragic events and eventual unhappy ending – accident, hospitalization and death (for Abby) and widowhood and financial loss (for Edith) – allows a narrative of social progress. This is achieved, however, at the expense of "othering" the older lesbian characters. While the association between aging as decline and loss is emphasized, in alignment with the discourse of aging as decline, *Walls 2* constructs old and young as binaries, with young occupying the norm. As opposed to the other two narrative segments, "1960" is the only one with an

unhappy ending. Finally, "1960" avoids representing Abby's and Edith's relationship as sexual, complying with the assumption of asexuality in old age, while all other couples are seen engaging in a sexual relationship. Ruby Rich's review of *Walls 2* addresses this tragic ending and the lack of intergenerational connections:

> So forgive me for wishing *If These Walls Could Talk 2* had included a fourth story, one in which the Ellen and Sharon and Chloe and Michelle characters could discover Vanessa at their corner bar, introduce her to their friends, and start carpooling to get her out at night.
> (2000)

Rich's alternative fourth story – featuring the characters Kal (Ellen DeGeneres) and Fran (Sharon Stone) and Amy (Chloë Sevigny) and Linda (Michelle Williams) – is a fantasized version of an intergenerational friendship and community so obviously lacking from *Walls 2*. In the films discussed thus far, the transient quality of the older lesbian on screen prevents role models and the sense of a past (Adelman, 1986) to take shape among younger generations of lesbian viewers. The old lesbian figure is apparitional, she "is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind" (Castle, 1993, p. 2).

*The Shipping News*

*The Shipping News* contains a character, Agnis Hamm (Judi Dench), who challenges the ghostly dimension of the old/er lesbian even though as Quoyle's (Kevin Spacey) aunt she only plays a supporting role and does not have much screen time.[7] Agnis is allowed a *temporal* dimension that includes past, present and future, which is often denied to characters within a narrative of decline, where the past is presented as more relevant. Although widowed (her partner died of leukemia), Agnis presents a rupture with the paradigm of the ghosted old lesbian – she is not "othered," has the opportunity to establish a new relationship and, in a "blink and you miss it" scene, a happy ending is implied.

Agnis' experience of loss does not single her out, since the loss of a loved one is similarly experienced by other characters in the film. In terms of romance, the conventional divide between heterosexual and lesbian, young and old characters is also surpassed. The opportunity to establish a new relationship is not restricted to the younger heterosexual couple (Quoyle and Wavey) as there are prospects of a new relationship between Agnis and her colleague Mavis (Nancy Beatty).

Against Hammer's (1993, p. 70) conviction "that a conventional cinema" is unable to "address the experiences or issues of lesbian and gay perceptions, concerns, and concepts" or the general assumption that independently produced cinema would be producing alternative depictions of lesbian characters (Weiss, 2004), *The Shipping News* presents an image of an older lesbian which goes against the apparitional model and challenges the paradigm of aging as decline. Although it cannot be described as a lesbian-themed film, this is the only example of a lesbian who makes it to "through to the last reel" (Russo, 1987, p. 293) and who has another character "to be a lesbian with" (Cottingham, 1996, p. 27).

## THE INDIE ALTERNATIVE?

To a certain extent *Hannah Free* and *Cloudburst*, both independent productions, comply with the paradigm of the ghosted lesbian, with key thematic continuities consisting of aging being depicted as decline, and the seemingly inevitable death and unhappy ending. *Hannah Free* and *Cloudburst* both address the problems of institutionalization into nursing homes, a lesbian couple's lack of legal rights, family tensions and eventual reconciliation.

*Hannah Free* is set in a nursing home, where butch Hannah (Sharon Gless, also Kelli Strickland as young Hannah) struggles with being confined to a hospital bed. Kept from visiting her life partner Rachel (Maureen Gallagher as older Rachel, Ann Hagemann as

younger Rachel) who lies in a coma in the same building, Hannah talks to (young) Rachel's ghost, reminiscing about their past, presented through flashback scenes.

*Cloudburst* centers on 80-something Stella (Olympia Dukakis) and Dot (Brenda Fricker), who decide to elope to Canada when an overprotective granddaughter, Molly (who assumes Stella and Dot are only friends), admits Dot into an assisted living facility. Stella breaks in and rescues Dot; they set off in their red pick-up truck and, along the way, meet hitchhiker Prentice (Ryan Doucette), who joins them on their road trip. After several tribulations, their marriage ceremony is interrupted by Molly's arrival. Driving back to their hotel, Dot feels unwell and in a desperate attempt to marry Stella before she dies, asks Prentice to perform the ceremony. They say "I do" as Dot passes away in Stella's arms. The pervasiveness of the unhappy lesbian ending is such that made for television films, mainstream productions and indie films fall back to the safety of representing older lesbian women within the parameters of aging as decline. In the context of *Cloudburst*, Dot's death is sudden and pointless, and an artificial device of narrative closure.

Although *Hannah Free* and *Cloudburst* both end with the death of one of the women, the older lesbian characters are protagonists and their stories and relationships are placed at the center of the narrative, which enables a slight shift and several moments of rupture with both the narrative of aging as decline and lesbian "ghosting." Furthermore, the surviving member of the couple is recognized as a widow by friends and family, she has someone to be a widow *with*. Compared to the depiction of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) in *Walls 2*, Hannah and Stella are allowed to say farewell to their loved ones and to mourn in public.

In *Hannah Free*, the paradigm of ghosting is surpassed by the portrayal of Hannah's and Rachel's lives together. The film's flashback scenes, portraying shared moments from childhood to old age, provide another dimension to these characters, rather than presenting Hannah's and Rachel's illness and fragility as their main characteristic. The intercalation

between scenes set in the nursing home and flashback scenes, depicting the characters as children, young adults and as older women, gives the impression they are all ages and none, creating a type of temporal vertigo, as defined by Lynn Segal (2013).

The mere inclusion of two lesbian characters allows for the occasional kiss and moments of intimacy to be portrayed on screen. As Dittmar (1997) argues in relation to Hammer's 1992 *Nitrate Kisses*,[8] images of intimacy and tenderness between two old lesbian women illustrate "the reality of enduring lesbian sexuality and urges viewers to enter into new relations to visibility and its taboos" (1997, p. 82). Both *Hannah Free* and *Cloudburst* thus expand the mode of old lesbian visibility and challenge the taboo of the aging lesbian body. Cruikshank (2008, p. 149) argues that "gerontologists and service providers have a vested interest in maintaining a fixed identity of 'old.' [...] If 'old' were fluid, changing, and indeterminate, it would be hard to tell who 'they' are." Hannah and Stella, as butch lesbians with a non-conforming attitude, challenge the traditional discourse of age and unsettle the identity of *old woman*. Their version of an aging female masculinity unsettles both age- and gender-stereotypes. Exploring Stella's transgressive potential is outside the remits of this article – suffice to say that her defiant performance of the "little old lady" (wearing a flowery nightdress as camouflage to blend in to the nursing home or putting on a headscarf when hitchhiking) consists of one of the best moments of anti-ageist and gender-bending transgressions depicted in film.

As a final point, I would like to consider briefly to what extend the films analyzed here allow for friendships and intergenerational encounters to be established, even without the portrayal of a wider lesbian community.

As illustrated through this analysis, the intersection of old age and lesbian sexuality on screen does not allow for much variation and complexity. Inevitably, the old lesbian widow emerges as the most visible image of an aging lesbian identity in contemporary cultural representation.

In the context of the positive images debate, Becker, Citron, Lesage and Rich (1995) identified the need for "films that deal with variation, complex identities, and contradiction – all outside the scope of the 'positive image' approach. Lesbian films cannot be considered outside the context of the lesbian community" (Becker, *et al*., 1995, p. 36). Nearly 20 years later neither "positive" nor complex images are available to illustrate the experience of an aging lesbian identity, or has the concept of a lesbian community trickled through to mainstream cultural representations. None of these films fully address the creativity and resilience in lesbians' chosen-relationships and other informal networks of support established by older lesbian women, as recent studies suggest (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004; Richard & Brown, 2006). And yet there are glimpses of the possibilities for intergenerational relationships of support.

*Hold Back the Night* allows Vera and Charleen to establish a bond towards the end of the film. Charleen adopts the position of the carer and holds Vera as she peacefully passes away. Their shared experience of otherness breaks downs the oppositional binaries of young/old, heterosexual/lesbian. The loneliness of old age and the fear of growing old and dying alone are surpassed and soothed in this narrative by the intergenerational friendship established between strangers. A similar scenario is presented in *Cloudburst*, where Prentice, Stella and Dot establish a meaningful and enduring friendship.

In *Hannah Free*, Hannah's friendship with a younger woman, Greta (eventually revealed to be her partner's grandniece and who also comes out as a lesbian), who assists Hannah in her escapades to see Rachel, allows a rare depictions of an intergenerational encounter between lesbian women on screen. When Greta reads Hannah's journals, there is an exchange of lesbian heritage, as well as family history. The deathbed scene in *Hannah Free* allows different generations of a family to reconcile. Bronfen argues that the deathbed scene "serves to close the gap in social relations produced by death. [...] The continuity that is assured is

one that involves the dying person in her or his relation to ancestors as well as to survivors" (1993, p. 77). An intergenerational encounter of care and reconciliation takes place when Rachel's mother joins Hannah and Greta around Rachel's deathbed to switch off her life-support machine. In this context, death is depicted as the natural next phase, which follows a long and happy life.

Several possibilities can be envisaged for more diverse images of non-heteronormative aging, as the independent films analyzed in this article indicate. It remains to be seen whether future modes of mainstream lesbian representation will allow more complexity and a move away from both lesbian stereotypes and stereotypes of aging. We need more images of successful lesbian aging as well as depictions of "successful frailty" (see Kriebernegg & Maierhofer, 2013) to ensure lesbians of all ages can find cultural images to identify *with* or identify *against*.

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**Notes**

[1] As I explored elsewhere (Krainitzki, 2012).

[2] Castle's analysis focuses on the apparitionalization of the lesbian in nineteenth-century literary texts (1993) but her concept has similarly been applied to the representation of lesbians within other national contexts (Mcleod, 2001) and applied to visual culture (Whitt, 2005).

[3] Without assuming there is a homogenized lesbian community (Pugh, 2002, 2005).

[4] For instance, USA show *The L Word* (Chaiken, 2004-2009) or UK series *Lip Service* (Braun, 2010- ).

[5] Averett (2012, p. 506) describes how lesbian widows, who are not recognised as such by society in general, are "particularly marginalized and vulnerable in older age."

[6] Following HBO's successful production of *If These Walls Could Talk* (Cher & Savoca, 1996), which focused on the abortion issue through three stories set in different eras, *If These Walls Could Talk 2*, *Walls 2* from henceforward, sets out to explore the life of lesbian couples through three decades, the 1960, the 1970s and the "present day," i.e. 2000.

[7] The film follows Annie Proulx' homonymous novel (1993) accurately in terms of its lesbian character.

[8] An experimental video which includes a long segment of two old lesbians making love.

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