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**‘Old age’ films: golden retirement, dispossession and disturbance.**

Since the first decade of the twenty first century a significant number of popular and/or critically acclaimed British films place ‘old age’ in the frame of attention. Employing the tropes of comedy (romantic and situation), realist drama, and the biopic, films such as *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2012 Madden) [hereinafter *Marigold 1*] - and its humorously titled sequel - *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2015 Madden) [hereinafter *Marigold 2*], *Quartet* (2012 Hoffman), *Last Orders* (2001 Schepisi), *The Mother* (2003 Michell), *The Queen* (2006 Frears), *Iris* (2001 Eyre) and *The Iron Lady* (2011 Lloyd) are characterised by a cohort of actors who have reached pensionable ages, and by protagonists and storylines that are attuned to the concerns of, or about, the sixties plus age group represented by the active retirees of the eponymous Marigold Hotel, the friendship groups of *Last Orders* and *Quartet*, the May/December sexual liaison of *The Mother*, the ongoing public engagement of ageing royalty in *The Queen*, or the bleak abjections of cognitive decline in *Iris* and *The Iron Lady*. Unlike preceding productions where older characters are little more than foils to the dramas of younger generations, these films are refreshingly focussed on their ageing protagonists and contemporary issues of ‘old age’.

Undoubtedly, this proliferation of ‘old age’ films can be attributed to economic imperatives as the British film industry exploits the highly lucrative ‘silver’ market by attracting audiences from the fastest growing demographic sector. In 2015, with one

in six people in the UK already aged over sixty five, and with projections that this will rise to one in four by 2050 (anon a), the 'silver' audience is now a key market sector, with the proportion of UK regular cinemagoers aged over forty five (the eldest of four age groups in BFI compiled statistics) rising from fourteen per cent in 1997 to thirty per cent in 2008 (Cox 2012). In 2012, *Marigold 1*'s over forty five audience constituted thirty six per cent of UK total attendances, making this the largest audience sector for the first time (Clark 2013), whilst 'UK films were popular across all demographic groups, with a particularly strong appeal for those aged 55 and above' (BFI Yearbook 2015). But, as exemplified by *Last Orders* (British/German co-production) which cost \$12 million to produce but earned only \$6,873,892 globally, domestic appeal rarely equates to profit, whereas, the \$86 million receipts earned from *Marigold 1*'s \$10million budget, and the \$83 million earned from its sequel's from a \$10 million budget, testify to the global appeal of some British 'old age' films.

Here, it needs to be emphasised that terms like 'older', 'ageing' and 'old age' are notoriously slippery. Like gender, sexuality, race or class, 'old age' needs to be seen as the product of discourse and culture, rather than an essential property of either chronology or biology (Gullette 2004, Woodward 2006). Here, Lipscomb and Marshall develop Butler's account of gender performativity to argue that age is similarly performative through 'actions associated with a chronological age', whilst 'the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and those who interact with it' (2010 10). Because 'old age' is discursive and performative, it always needs to be understood as the product of specific contexts.

One context is the boom and bust trajectory of the post-Thatcher, neo-liberal economy that helped shape attitudes to 'old age' as it traced through Conservative, New Labour and Coalition governments. Whilst New Labour aimed to alleviate

poverty amongst the most socially disadvantaged by reversing some Conservative welfare policies (Hills 1998), it did little to disturb the post-Thatcher investment legacy that promised generous private pensions and golden, leisured retirements. This promise was brutally broken by the 2007 banking crash that decimated investment and savings dividends, and reduced property and pension values. When this collapse combined with projections of increased dependency on state pensions by an ageing demographic, a shift in discourses surrounding 'old age' occurred. Where increased longevity was once cause for celebration of the advances in medical science and improved social welfare through which it had been achieved, it instead triggered cultural anxieties about the so-called 'crisis of ageing' - a crisis that is increasingly constituted as a fiscal and emotional burden of care to be borne by the state, by families and by individuals.

As a burgeoning body of scholarship reminds us, 'old age', however configured, intersects with, and is shaped by, other identity formations, notably gender, which in turn, is inflected through a middle-class, white, representational hegemony. Dominating this scholarship are concerns with the celebrity/star nexus and its regulation of ageing femininity (Dolan and Tincknell 2012; Jermyn and Holmes 2015; Wearing 2007; Whelehan & Gwynne 2014), and/or Hollywood cinema (Chivers 2011, Gravagne 2013), to the neglect of 'old age' film narratives from British producers. Equally, this scholarship typically pays little attention to the nuances of ageing in pre and post-crash formations. This paper aims to address these gaps in knowledge by asking how do pre-recession and recession contexts shape the narratives of British 'old age' films? How do these films resonate with 'crisis of ageing' discourse and attendant concerns about pensions and the ageing body?

## **The golden retirement dream: loss and reinstatement**

Despite being populated by characters of retirement age, pension provision, rarely figures in the cultural verisimilitude of either pre or post-crash narratives, with *Last Orders*, *Marigold 1* and *Marigold 2* being notable exceptions. However, much is implied through the social milieu of characters. For instance, representations of Queen Elizabeth II (Helen Mirren) and Margaret Thatcher (Meryl Streep) in *The Queen* and *The Iron Lady* connote the 'taken for granted' economic security of those in possession of extreme, even unassailable, wealth. In very different ways, *Iris* and *The Mother* represent the cushioned material comforts of the pre-recession middle-classes. In *The Mother*, a suburban location combines with the general demeanor and economic independence of the film's widowed protagonist, May (Anne Reid), to suggest that she is not solely reliant on her state pension, whilst in *Iris*, the bookish and paper littered domestic home of Iris Murdoch (Judi Dench) and John Bayley (Jim Broadbent) signifies the kind of cultural capital and intellectual property that translates into recession resistant security. Thus, whether produced in boom or recession contexts, these films imply an 'old age' with sufficient private capital to support some version of the golden retirement dream, unless thwarted by widowhood as in *The Mother*, or the cognitive impairment represented in *Iris* and *The Iron Lady*.

The characters of the post-crash film, *Quartet*, also enjoy a version of the 'dream', but here, material and intellectual comfort accrues from the cultural, rather than economic capital, of retired opera singers, Reginald 'Reg' Paget (Tom Courtenay) Cecily 'Cissy' Robson (Pauline Collins), Jean Horton (Maggie Smith) Anne Langley (Gwyneth Jones), Cedric Livingstone (Michael Gambon), Wilfred 'Wilf' Bond (Billy Connolly). Located in a fictional retirement home for retired opera

singers, Beecham House, *Quartet* is based on the actual Casa di Riposo per Musicisti founded in 1896 by Verdi as a shelter for retired performers. This location forges a continuity between diegetic and extra diegetic worlds, reminding audiences that, without similar charitable patronage, patterns of intermittent work and low pay means an impoverished old age for many performers from both high and popular culture, thus highlighting the attenuation of 'old age' poverty amongst retired performers, and retirees more broadly, that arose with the losses of the 2007 crash. In *Quartet* though, 'old age' poverty is tempered, rendered genteel, by the Downtonesque grandeur of Beecham House that glosses the straightened circumstances of its retirees.

Here then, *Last Orders*, *Marigold 1*, *Marigold 2* are of interest because their pre and post-crash narratives explicitly address pension provision, whilst powerfully exposing exclusions from the golden retirement mythology, even as they then 'magically' reinstate inclusion. With Michael Caine playing Jack Dodds and Helen Mirren his wife/widow Amy, *Last Orders* recounts the journey made by the Dodds's adopted son Vince (Ray Winstone), and Jack's aged Cockney drinking pals - professional horse gambler, Ray Johnson, aka Lucky (Bob Hoskins), undertaker Vic Tucker (Tom Courtenay), ex-boxer (David Hemmings) - as they fulfil his final request (last order) to scatter his ashes at Margate. Released in the pre-recession economic boom when the golden retirement dream was at its pinnacle, the East London location of *Last Orders* combines with the muted colours of social realism to establish a familiar working class milieu that effectively shifts attention from the prevailing cinematic focus on middle class retirees, whilst illuminating the class based exclusions of neo-liberal prosperity.

Jack, a self-employed butcher, has insufficient capital to support retirement, and works until death. Employing a flashback structure, *Last Orders* cuts between Jack in his hospital death bed and the groups' individual recollections, thereby establishing a richly, complex web of relationships stretching back to The Second World War. In one flashback, Lucky recollects a recent event. With a legacy of only loan shark debts, a desperate Jack borrows £1,000 from Vince. Banking on Lucky's tipster skills, the entire loan is placed on Fancy Free, which in a moment of pathos, romps home at thirty three to one, just as Jack dies safe in the knowledge that Lucky will settle outstanding debts to both loan sharks and Vince, and follow his wish to 'see Amy right'. Here the betting scenario cannot be reduced to mere prop in the constitution of working class homosociality since it powerfully invites an alignment between gambling and pension investment, and whilst Jack's final gamble pays off, the potential for devastating loss is implicit. Hence, whilst the loan signifies the lack of capital that excluded him, and the working classes more generally, from the investment jamboree of the economic boom, the gamble flags up the potential for those damaging losses subsequently experienced in the crash. But crucially, the winning storyline covers over such exposure, offering comforting closure to the film's potential ruptures to neo liberal ideologies.

Losses in the investment gamble underpin the move to low-cost living in India made by some Marigold characters. Widow Evelyn Greenslade (Judi Dench) was left only debts by her investor husband, and Douglas (Bill Nighy) and Jean Ainslie (Penelope Wilton) had seemingly lost a 'gold plated' civil service pay-out in their daughter's internet business. Other characters, such as ageing roué Norman Cousins (Ronald Pickup channelling Leslie Phillips) and serial monogamist Madge Hardcastle (Celia Imrie) were already excluded from the golden dream because of

lifestyle choices, whilst the dismal housing estate where former nanny and housekeeper, Muriel Donnelly (Maggie Smith), lives in lonely isolation, speaks of her exclusion from middle class privilege and private pension benefits. Without doubt, with its travel adventure, low cost living, hotel service, and community living, the removal to India revitalises both the material and emotional promises of the golden retirement dream in a post-recession context.

Notably, via Jean Ainslie, discordant notes of anger and resentment at lost expectations disturb the Marigold utopia. But these are represented as deeply unpleasant personal attributes, rather than a justifiable response to pension losses. In a pre-India scene, Jean's quite reasonable critique of special safety features in a depressingly bland, purpose-built retirement bungalow, 'What if we happened to fall somewhere else ....It's just that we might not manage to plan our sudden fall where the button is ... And would it be possible to have the rail running through the middle of the room?', is couched as embittered nagging. This then becomes her hallmark and brands her the selfish 'spoilsport' of the Marigold adventure. Such pathologisation is further developed when she makes ingratiating, snobbish overtures to QC Graham Dashwood (Tom Wilkinson), and is then consolidated through her racist distaste of India's culture, its people, its crowds, its noise and what she perceives to be its polluting dirt. Whilst Muriel is also established as racist, 'Brown faces and black hearts; reeking of curry ... they move in packs, makes it easier to rob you blind', subsequent friendships with a Dalit (low-caste) hotel maid, Anokhi (Seema Azmi), and hotel owner, Sonny Kapoor (Dev Patel), foster a total conversion that is registered when she secures her Indian home by rescuing the hotel from bankrupt closure. In marked contrast, Jean's racism remains a steadfastly unchanged aspect of an unsympathetic character. Here, with anger at lost



expectations so closely intertwined with snobbery and racism, any sympathy for the former is overwhelmed by the latter. Thus, potential alignments between the film and extra- diegetic oppositional movements, such as Age UK and Pensioners Campaign UK, that articulate widespread anger at recession pension losses, whilst agitating for improved state pension and retirement rights, are effectively closed down. To put this another way, *Marigold 1* evokes opposition to passive acceptance of the effects of the crash, only to pathologise its expression, and thus an ideological veil of closure is produced.

Clearly then, pension provision, and the interlinked myth of the golden retirement dream, informs British 'old age' films, with cultural, as much as economic capital, establishing nuances of class based access in both pre and post-crash contexts. Whilst the films variously expose economic exclusion from the dream due to low income or investment losses, narratives consistently work to offer ideological closures that either pathologise the discontents of reduced retirement expectations, or serve to 'magically' reinstate the dream. But, this is not the final word since the dynamic between British 'old age' films and 'crisis of ageing' measures to raise retirement ages, and thus defer retirement, need to be addressed.

### **Embodiment and deferred retirement**

It is something of a truism that stars sell films, and full credit for the domestic and global appeal of British 'old age' films must be granted to the familiar cohort of actors who populate their narratives, perform their characters, and are fully imbricated in what Jermyn (2014) terms the 'greying of mainstream cinema'. The careers of this acting cohort span the life courses of 'silvered' audiences, whilst their

individual portfolios of film and television appearances are embedded in public memory of British film and television particularly, and Hollywood and popular culture more broadly, with rich cultural treasures connoted by each name. Because of their familiarity, often through the domestic medium of television, the cohort's appeal is akin to the comfort of long-standing friendships as 'silvered' audiences remember actors' youthful appearances, even as they identify the signs of ageing inscribed on their wrinkled faces and/or sagging flesh; or perhaps scrutinise for signs of rejuvenation procedures and/or those post-production image enhancements that Sobchak terms 'the second order of plastic surgery' (1999 206).

A sprinkling of Hollywood stars, notably Meryl Streep in *The Iron Lady* and Richard Gere in *Marigold 2*, testifies to the perennial lure and demands of lucrative American and global markets. With Gere, his particular brand of masculine, sexual allure chimes with public memory of wartime GI glamour that continues to hold some purchase with British audiences, whilst for global audiences, it constitutes a defining counterpoint to the sleazy/restrained dichotomy that underpins the sexual images of British male actors, typified by Ronald Pickup and Bill Nighy in the *Marigold* films. And with Streep, an image based on acting ability in the roles of complex and enigmatic heroines, as well as an association with quality adaptations (especially bio-pics) (Hollinger 2000 72-89) mobilises the 'cross over' from US 'dame' identity and its alignment with feminine allure, to that of the British Dame and its equation with theatrical credibility and quality performance (Geraghty 2002). Effectively, the crossover produces a double narrative: a constant reminder that 'a Hollywood actress, (a US dame) is appearing in a British film' (Geraghty 2002 54). Thus the insertion of major Hollywood stars into the British cohort does little to unsettle its 'Britishness', even as it promises global appeal.

Crucially, as Dyer (1991) suggests, stars cannot be reduced to their marketing value. As complex signifying systems produced in a fluid mesh of media circuits, they are deeply ideological and function as, 'embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they make sense of their lives,' (1991 18). And crucially, this cohort of British stars positively embody 'crisis of ageing' injunctions to defer retirement. In 2014, figures from the UK Department for Work and Pensions show that more than one million over sixty fives continue to work, an increase of more than a quarter of a million since 2011 when statutory retirement ages were abolished (Webb 2014). Undoubtedly, some of this increase can be attributed to the pleasures of the workplace, as much as to economic pressures, but deferred retirement also has to be ideologically normalised. Here, all actors who continue to work long past western retirement ages in film and television productions, as well as surrounding publicity events, function to embody, exemplify and normalise the benefits of an extended working life. In this way, 'old age' actors are fully embedded in the ideological, management of deferred retirement.

This ideological management is then reiterated in film storylines, though deferred retirement can be variously couched as a burden to be borne. With pre-recession *Last Orders*, Jack's extended working is symptomatic of relative poverty, associated debts and exclusion from the neo-liberal investment jamboree, whereas in *The Queen*, it is represented as a constitutional responsibility for Queen Elizabeth II at seventy one, the Duke of Edinburgh (James Cornwall) at seventy six and the Queen Mother (Sylvia Syms) at ninety seven, who, regardless of age, state of health or economic privilege, will never retire. For them, extended working is a normalised expectation. And, royalty, like stars, also embody and naturalise social values. This is especially potent when the 'claims to truth' of the biopic combine with on-screen

doubling of star and royal figure (Dolan 2012 46-4). Initially, as Dolan suggests, this account of the royal work ethic fed into the film's ideological recuperation of the monarchy, but in the 'crisis of ageing' context, deferred retirement is positively embodied.

Like the royal family, the guests at *Quarter's* Beecham House never fully retire, since the home's financial health requires guests to 'sing for their suppers' by mentoring young performers, lecturing and contributing to the home's annual fund raising production. The narrative trajectory from rehearsal to production of *Rigoletto* exposes inevitable ego frictions, Cedric's directorial bullying, unresolved sexual tensions between divorced Reg and Jean, Wilf's Tourette-like inappropriateness, and Cissy's dementia induced outbursts, but ultimately, with work providing the glue of loving community, and the chords of Verdi offering a glorious, last(ing) impression, deferred retirement is affirmed.

*Marigold 1* and *Marigold 2* also embody similarly affirmative accounts of deferred retirement. In *Marigold 1*, Evelyn works in a call centre, whilst in the sequel, she is recruited to source fabric for the British market. Meanwhile, Muriel, revealed to have a head for figures, secures the future of the hotel when she disentangles its financial mess, earning herself a managerial position that she occupies till her death at the end of *Marigold 2*. *Marigold 2* also has Douglas work as a tour guide, even though his internet investment has finally paid a dividend. Here, when compared to Jack's extended working life in *Last Orders*, and apart from Evelyn's initial employment, none of the Marigold characters work simply to make money. Nor is there a moral or constitutional imperative akin to that of *The Queen's* royal family. Rather, for the Marigolders, work adds social and cultural value to their everyday experiences. Whist this can be seen as a marker of the films' normative middle class

hegemony, it also sanctions and vindicates deferred retirement, effectively rendering it a 'hobby', and thus transforming it from a post-recession economic injunction to a pleasurable social activity.

### **Disturbing dispossessions: neo-colonialism, sexual desire and ageist homophobia**

However, in the *Marigold* films, deferred retirement extols a deeply disturbing neo-colonialism that, despite the disavowal of racism espoused in the film's pathologisation of Jean and its conversion of Muriel, echoes the racist power dynamics of white privilege and native Indian dispossession that underpinned the Raj. This echo is triggered by the films' 'common sense' reproduction of globalised labour hierarchies in which third world nations increasingly provide care for the elderly of the first world, both as a migrant workforce and as hosts to ex-pat retirees. Equally, the British incomers always know better than the local Indian population. Muriel's rescue of the hotel was necessary because of Sonny's incompetence. Evelyn does not simply work at a Mumbai call-centre, she 'teaches' more effective communication to Indian operatives. Then, when sourcing fabric in *Marigold 2*, a business deal that totally undercuts the profits of a major Indian supplier is couched as Evelyn's victory over 'native' shady dealings, rather than as First World exploitation of the Indian market. Meanwhile, in *Marigold 2*, superior native knowledge is appropriated by Douglas who conceals his own failings as a tour guide by receiving transmitted information from a concealed local boy. Even something as seemingly innocuous as street cricket takes on a neo-colonialist hue when Graham teaches better technique to the local boys. Thus, the basic premise of the film

combines with the normalised superior attitudes of its white characters in the dispossessions of a troubling neo-colonial nexus.

This nexus is further exacerbated when the films' generic verisimilitude is secured by stories of bumpy roads to heterosexual coupledness; Sonny and Sunaina (Tena Desae); Evelyn and Douglas; Guy Chambers (Richard Gere) and Mrs. Kapoor (Lillete Dubey); Norman and Carol Parr (Diana Hardcastle); Madge and Babul (Rajesh Tailang). Here, like many British 'old age' films, *Marigold 1* and *Marigold 2* positively unsettle the pervasive idea that "dispossession" from various discursive configurations including sentimental or sexual relationships' is a norm of 'old age' (Woodward 1991 149). In the challenge to such dispossessions, Madge, who juggles affairs with two wealthy Indian men, embodies Greer's formulation of the independent, older woman who 'decide(s) to seek sensual pleasure before it is too late' (1992 285).

Ultimately though, Madge chooses Babul, her regular, and younger, taxi driver. In this, *Marigold 2* reprises the gender inversion of the May/December attachment that underpins the excoriating dispossessions of failed family ties in *The Mother*. Determined to live, rather than decline, recently widowed May flits between her children's homes, where she is treated as free childcare by her daughter, Paula (Cathryn Bradshaw), and a troublesome intrusion by her son, Bobby (Steven Mackintosh). Seeking alleviation from the multiple dispossessions of her life, May initiates a highly charged sexual affair with the only character to recognise her isolation, her daughter's lover, the much younger Darren (Daniel Craig). Inverting patriarchal and politics of looking, Darren's body is subjected to May's objectifying and sexualized gaze, represented through point of view shots and sketches of her sexual fantasies. Here, Paula's disgust at her mother's explicit eroticism exposes the

ageism that underpins the dispossession of older women from sentimental and sexual relationships. Unsurprisingly, the ultimate dénouement of the affair produces an exposing, explosive and estranging row that is brutally damaging to all concerned. Yet, even so, the film's ending, when May departs for an unknown destination, is not an image of despondent dispossession, but one of new beginnings for a newly confident May no longer trapped by the pre-scripted certainties of stereotypical 'old age' (Swinnen 2015 69).

In a similar vein, *Marigold 2*, Madge's juggling of two lovers makes explicit her ongoing sexuality. Simultaneously, her love for Babul grows from the tender and thoughtful care that she witnesses him provide for family members, and that he unstintingly offers to her. For this couple, sex is the outcome of love, not its substitute, and thus Madge is distanced from the predatory discourses that all too frequently attend the older woman/younger lover pairing. There is much to celebrate in this representation of a May/December, mixed-race love relationship, but paradoxically, at this juncture, the film's hegemonic neo-colonialism intensifies. Whilst inverting the gender norms of May/December relationships, Madge also inverts the gendered sexual dynamics of colonialism, which positioned Indian women as fair game for the appetites of white men, but placed strict taboos on mixed race relationships for white women, because they were held responsible for racial purity (Young 1996: 44-48). In short, Madge can be seen to adopt the mantle of colonial exploitative sexual relations previously held as a male preserve.

Furthermore, even with the distancing noted above, Madge's behaviour remains disturbingly close to sexual tourism. Writing about the Caribbean, Sheller (2003) argues that tourists per se occupy the safe margins of former colonial territories in ways that reproduce colonial geographies of difference and thereby

reiterate first world privileges over third world cultures (166). She further argues that sex tourism turns ‘the long history of sexual exploitation of women (and men) under colonial rule into a “lived colonial fantasy” available for the mass tourist consumer’ (164). With residence at the Marigold Hotel chiming with tourist activity, Madge’s sexual activity adds further weight to the Marigold films’ troubling neo-colonialism. So too the affair that develops in *Marigold 2* between Guy Chambers and Mrs. Kapoor.

*Last Orders* also triggers disturbing discursive ripples through its mesh of emotional entanglement when flashback sequences reveal a short lived affair between the younger Amy and ‘Lucky’. Organised around visits to June (Laura Morelli), the Dodd’s disabled daughter whose very existence is denied by Jack, the affair offers to Amy an emotional sustenance missing from her marriage. The affair is ended by ‘Lucky’ who recalls, ‘We couldn’t do it to Jack’. With that knowledge in place, Jack’s deathbed concern that ‘Lucky’ should take care of Amy accrues an extra layer of meaning, a poignant knowingness that pre-figures the film’s conclusion when Amy and ‘Lucky’ share plans for a future ‘golden’ retirement. This powerfully touching scenario is not without problems, since it involves what Rubin (2011) identifies as an ‘exchange of women’ that, like gambling, underpins the homosocial bonds of patriarchy that deny to women, ‘full rights to themselves’ (175). Rubin’s argument can be usefully illustrated by *The Queen*. A bedroom scene between the Queen and Prince Philip has them costumed for the night. A TV broadcasts Martin Bashir’s iconic “Queen of Hearts interview” with Princess Diana, whilst the couple’s interjected remarks register original approval of “the match” they were both happy to “sign off”. Here, the language of commerce foregrounds the gendered terms of dynastic marital exchange, and the concomitant denial of women’s ‘full rights to themselves’. In slightly different veins of exchange, *Marigold 2* has Sonny pandering



to Guy Chambers, who he believes to be a hotel inspector, and by his own admission, 'pimping' his mother to curry favour, whilst *Last Orders* secures the lasting loyalty and friendship between Jack and 'Lucky' in the exchange of Amy. In all cases, there is a denial, or dispossession, of a woman's romantic and sexual desires.

It can be seen then that 'old age' British films insistently challenge and disturb some pervasive stereotypes of sexual and sentimental dispossession, but, these disturbances produce further discursive ripples that are equally disturbing since they mobilise the problematic dispossessions of neo-colonialist discourse and some troubling homosocial exchanges in women. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that the welcome challenges to sexual and sentimental dispossession made by British 'old age' films are disturbingly heteronormative. *Marigold 1* is exceptional because of gay character Graham. But even this is not a straightforward breakthrough since the film represents male same-sex desire, to the exclusion of female, chiming with Kraitizki's (2016) observation that unless rendered predatory and pathological, 'old age' lesbian desire is a significant absence of mainstream film.

Just as problematically, *Marigold 1*'s invocation of gay desire is little more than a gesture that facilitates heteronormative recuperation. Graham, it transpires, had spent his boyhood in India and is searching for Manoj (Rajendra Gupta), the love of his life from whom he had been forcibly separated following discovery of their illicit, and illegal, teenage love. Assuming that Manoj had been abandoned to a solitary life of pathologised dispossession, Graham had carried a life-long burden of guilt. At their reunion, Manoj is contrarily revealed to be a contentedly married grandfather whose accepting wife welcomes Graham's return. Finally at peace, Graham dies. His funeral, organised by Manoj and faithful to Hindu rites, is a deeply

moving cinematic spectacle. However, the spectacle effectively camouflages an invidious and disturbing homophobic nexus constituted through the recuperation of Manoj into heterosexual compliance, the death of Graham, and a funeral that symbolically cleanses the narrative of homosexual desire. With the film's celebratory closing sequence of happy, heterosexual couples circling on motor scooters, the narrative's heteronormative trajectory is firmly sealed, so too the sentimental and sexual dispossessions of same-sex 'old age'.

The excision of homosexual desire from British 'old age' films suggests that, even fifty years after the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967, cultural anxieties about same sex relationships pertain. And, the expression of this anxiety inserts ageism into homophobic prejudices. After all, gay storylines and characters are often represented in mainstream film and TV productions, but crucially, these focus on youthful, rather than ageing, male bodies. Here then, it can be seen that the ageing male body, rather than its youthful counterpart, bears the burden of homophobic anxieties.

### **Gendered abjections and the 'old man' as 'new man'**

Another anxiety adhering to the ageing male body, erectile dysfunction, is rehearsed within *Marigold 1*'s heteronormative framing when ageing lothario, Norman, finally accepts his undesirability to younger women, and embarks on an affair with Carol (Diana Hardcastle). Subsequently, using a pseudonym, Norman attends a local clinic, where a conspicuously displayed poster - 'Lost Your Vigour' – exposes both his purpose and its underlying anxieties. Clearly, one such anxiety equates to sexual, if not sentimental, dispossession. Equally, as Marshall explains, male sexual dysfunction is not akin to other conditions since a series of connotations

in bio-medical discourse have elided sexual function, sexual health and the overall health of the ageing male body (2011 391-393). In other words, sexual dysfunction signifies the declining, vulnerably mortal body, as much as those discourses of lost virility that equate to the dispossessions of a damaging feminisation. As illuminated by Norman, sexual dysfunction carries an overwhelming burden of shame. Here, the sexually dysfunctional male body is constituted as abject in that it becomes both repellant and taboo. Moreover, because the sexually dysfunctional male body carries the dichotomous meanings of masculine/feminine and living/dying, it chimes with Kristeva's (1982) notion that the abject floats between established orders, and thus, unsettles and disturbs them.

Crucially, for Kristeva, the disturbances of the abject extend to include self/other boundaries. Thus any shaming and shameful signs of abjection, such as vulnerability, lost virility and even death, cannot be safely contained because self/other boundaries are destabilised. With such disturbances in play, there is potential for on-screen abjections to bleed across to the off-screen world of the audience. But, through a series of comedic disavowals *Marigold 1* carefully contains this potential. Containment commences when Carol glimpses Norman's secreted Viagra before substituting an aspirin, correctly assuming that a placebo will serve equally well. Given that the round white aspirin bears no resemblance to the distinctive blue Viagra lozenge, and most audiences know this, the film invites a colluding disavowal of this knowledge and thereby establishes a distance between the fictional and the factual: between diegetic and extra-diegetic worlds: between on-screen 'others' and off-screen 'self'. Thus the shaming and shameful abjections of sexual dysfunction are aired, but safely contained within on-screen fictions.

Where sexual dysfunction points to the abjections of ageing masculinity, films like, *Iris*, *The Iron Lady* and *Quartet*, foreground and reproduce the abjections of ageing femininity that play through the global proliferation of dementia productions (Graham 2014; Wearing 2013). Unlike sexual dysfunction, dementia is not a gendered condition, though it is the case that sixty one percent of people diagnosed with dementia are women. However, this is largely attributable to women's greater longevity, and current research suggests that women are at no greater risk than men (anon b). Yet, the global weight of cinematic representations relentlessly implies that dementia is a female condition. This is especially telling when 'claims to truth' of British bio-pics *Iris* and *The Iron Lady*, represent the cognitive decline of two intellectually astute women – the great philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch reduced to watching *Teletubbies*, and Britain's first woman Prime Minister taking tea with her dead husband Denis (Jim Broadbent), now a figment of her imagination. Undoubtedly, this generates sympathy for the characters, especially in *The Iron Lady*, which is frequently shot from Margaret Thatcher's point of view, registering the confusions of the illness and working to humanise this frequently demonised public figure. Nonetheless, it remains the case that the flashback structures of both films repeatedly juxtapose the younger and brilliant Margaret Thatcher (Alexandra Roach) and Iris Murdoch (Kate Winslett) to the confusions, dishabille and disorder of their late-life dementia. This structure invites a pathologising gaze that objectifies and renders abject the person with dementia, and like the comedic disavowals of *Marigold 1*, this objectifying gaze secures on/off screen distancing, thus containing abjection within the diegetic world.

Swinnen argues that the recourse to abjection within dementia films triggers narratives of decline, whilst serving to dispossess from full personhood the person

with dementia (205 71). In marked contrast, through Cissy, *Quartet* unsettles this persistent image. As with Margaret Thatcher and Iris Murdoch, opera performer Cissy is represented as having a successful, fulfilling and famous past. Yet, in contrast to the imagery of decline and social isolation that haunts *The Iron Lady* and *Iris*, at no point is Cissy's past allowed to diminish or pathologise her present: a present defined by the full and active participation within community and the full possession of personhood. It is the case that these films may simply represent different stages of what is a progressive illness. However, because of the global weight of cinematic representations of dementia as abject decline, greater credibility accrues to this imagery, rather than to those of continuing personhood. This credibility is further shored up by the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy of genres. Effectively, the 'claims to truth' of the biopics *Iris* and *The Iron Lady* outweigh the comedic fictions of *Quartet*, and thus their feminised version of abjected cognitive decline gains precedence. Hence, with British 'old age' films fully imbricated in the global feminisation of dementia, its biopics constitute the 'truth' of the condition to be abjected decline and dispossession from full personhood.

In line with imagery of female decline, a recurring trope of the male carer dominates dementia films, even though the gender balance of caring is roughly fifty/fifty (Slack and Fraser 2014). Thus, where these films feminise dementia, they also masculinise caring through their accounts of loving, supportive husbands or friends - John Bayley in *Iris*, Denis Thatcher in *The Iron Lady*, Reg Paget in *Quartet*. Here, past/present and then/now time management establishes the loving care given by the older Bayley, Thatcher and the fictional Paget as a continuity of admiring support they unstintingly gave to the youthful successes of Margaret Thatcher, Iris Murdoch and Cissy Robson. This formation of caring, supportive masculinity

corresponds the 'new man' configuration which first emerged in nineteen eighties responses to Second Wave Feminism. Effectively, this correspondence aligns the 'old' man of the noughties with the 'new man' of the eighties, which in turn, is retro-fitted to the young man of the fifties. Such retro-fitting is not confined to 'old age' films. Analysis of *Iris* alongside other women writer biopics, *The Hours* (2002 Daldry) and *Sylvia* (2003 Jeffs), identifies how female intellectuals of the nineteen thirties and fifties, Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman), Iris Murdoch, and Sylvia Plath (Gwyneth Paltrow), are similarly stereotyped as neurotic and/or mentally unstable, and then juxtaposed to caring 'new man' formulations embodied by Hugh Bonneville as the young John Bayley, Stephen Dillane as Leonard Woolf and Daniel Craig as Ted Hughes (Dolan, Gordon and Tincknell 2009). Such retro-fitting of the 'new man' effectively denies and effaces the very basis of Second Wave Feminism since it renders redundant the movement's fundamental formulation of an oppressive patriarchal culture that denied women's ambition and confined them to domestic roles. This dispossession of feminism's fundamental rationale feeds into postfeminist culture. Where postfeminism is usually associated with the denial of feminism by the generation of women who most benefit from its advances (Tasker and Negra 2007), the denials of retro-fitting assert feminism's redundancy because it was never, ever a necessary movement.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, whether produced in pre or post-crash contexts, British 'old age' films are shaped by recurring tropes and discourses. Of these, the myth of the 'golden' retirement dominates. Notably, in *Last Orders*, *Quartet* and *Marigold 1*, the economic circumstances of protagonists ostensibly exclude them from the dream, yet, narrative

resolutions 'magically' restore it to them in ideological glosses of its contingencies. Even as 'old age' films render the 'dream' hegemonic, a conjunction of stars and storylines simultaneously embodies and normalises deferred retirement, rendering extended working a pleasurable social activity, rather than an economic necessity. That normalisation is consolidated through *Marigold 1*'s pathologisation of counter-discourses to 'crisis of ageing' deferred retirement policies.

To their credit, representations of 'old age' in *The Mother*, *Last Orders* and the *Marigold* films insistently challenge pervasive stereotypes of sexual and sentimental dispossession. But in turn, these challenges mobilise other problematic and invidious dispossessions; with the *Marigold* films inverting, and re-gendering, colonial sexualised hierarchies of race as they overlap with the power dynamics of the global labour market and sexual tourism in the constitution of a neo-colonial nexus; whilst *Last Orders* illuminates the troubling exchange of women that secure the bonds of homosocial culture. Equally problematic is the overweening hetero-normativity of these films that consistently denies expression of healthy, lesbian desire in 'old age', and as in *Marigold 1*, evokes homosexual desire only to erase it in a gesture of disturbing ageist, homophobia redolent of persistent cultural anxieties. *Marigold 1* also highlights cultural anxieties mapped onto the ageing male body when sexual dysfunction is articulated as a shameful and shaming abjection whose potential to disturb the 'self'/other' boundary is carefully contained by a distancing, chain of disavowals triggered by the narrative. Similarly, with dementia feminised, diegetic/extra-diegetic distancing stems from the pathological gaze that constitutes the abjections of *The Iron Lady* and *Iris*: abjections that are further reinforced when *Quartet*'s positive and life affirming account of dementia are outweighed by the biopics' 'claims to truth'. Such differences notwithstanding, British dementia films

consistently mobilise the figure of the male partner whose caring concern aligns with eighties 'new man' discourse. In turn, this is retro-fitted to nineteen fifties masculinity, effectively denying the very foundations of Second Wave Feminist protest, and constituting a postfeminist gesture that renders feminism both unnecessary and redundant. Thus, the critical interest of these films is not confined to representations of 'old age' and its dispossessions; but extends through their disturbances of those dispossessions and the disturbing formations thus triggered.

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