

ARTICLE

Ageing and romance on the big screen: the ‘silvering romantic comedy’ *Elsa & Fred*

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Abstract

The radical demographic change produced by the ageing population in the Western world has entailed a complete transformation of its popular culture. The cinema is one of the popular arts to have been especially affected by the so-called ‘longevity revolution’. In fact, an important part of Hollywood celebrity culture and the mainstream film audiences belong to the same ageing demographic. The increasing necessity to tell and consume stories of ageing for the big screen is not only reflected in the growing number of films that feature older characters in their lead roles, but also in the changes produced in the cinematic narratives themselves. Film scholars within the inter-disciplinary field of cultural gerontology have started to address this phenomenon from various perspectives. Building on from their critical consideration, this article focuses on the particular case of Michael Radford’s *Elsa & Fred*, a contemporary film released in 2014 that, paradoxically enough, helps renovate the youth-oriented genre of the romantic comedy through a ‘silvering’ romance. Taking into account contemporary manifestations of the romantic comedy genre, the essay proves that Radford’s comedy contributes to the development of the ‘gerontocom’ as a new sub-genre in which old age is central to the protagonists’ characterisations and storylines. By considering the interaction of the generic rules of the genre with the hyper-visibility of the protagonists’ agedness, this article also shows the ways in which the film overcomes polarised views of ageing and enhances the figures’ own process of becoming in the last stage of their lives.

Keywords: ageing; romantic comedy; ‘gerontocom’; popular films; cultural gerontology

Introduction: the ‘silvering screen’ and the developments of the romantic comedy

The medical and socio-economic improvements that, since the 20th century, have enabled the extraordinary increase in life expectancy in the Western world have radically changed the demographic composition of Western societies and, with them, their manifestations of popular culture. Mainstream cinema is no exception to this. The cultural gerontologist and film critic Sally Chivers (2011: xvi) has coined the term ‘silvering screen’ in her study of cinematic representations of old

age to refer to a growing number of films that feature ageing and its signs (like silver-haired actors) prominently. In a more recent publication, Josie Dolan (2017: 1–2) has continued to draw on this term, in her case referring to both the increasing visibility of old age in mainstream cinema through new roles for its ageing stars, and the profitable ('silver') effect that films on old age are proving to have within the industry. Within this context, the growing market for films on ageing or with older protagonists can be easily aligned with the great number of Hollywood celebrities who, as ageing baby-boomers themselves, have now become 'silvering' stars for this new niche of the film business. Names like Clint Eastwood, Robert de Niro, Diane Keaton, Bill Nighy, Meryl Streep, Judi Dench, Maggie Smith or Helen Mirren, continue to lead the casts of highly profitable films which have ceased to make the big screen a hostile place for older actors, and which, in fact, address a specific target audience of ageing viewers who want to see themselves recognised in the roles they play. Nevertheless, the increasing number of films with older actors in the leading roles does not necessarily entail a substantial change in the narratives of old age of which they are part. In their respective publications on cinematic representations of ageing, Lipscomb and Marshall (2010), Cohen-Shalev (2012), Chivers (2011) and Dolan (2017) reveal that the narrative of decline through which ageing and old age have been constructed in the Western world (Gullette 2004, 2011) is permanently presented in much of Hollywood and, albeit to a lesser extent, in independent cinema. Despite the increasingly nuanced portrayal of old age that is now offered through contemporary cinema, many films which feature older celebrities may simply reinforce the youth-obsessed tendency of mainstream cinema and culture.

Mainstream cinema and Hollywood films in particular have been frequently blamed for perpetuating the Western cult of youth. This is especially the case of romantic comedies, which have typically followed the 'boy-meets-girl' formula in order to create narratives of (predominantly hetero-normative) love between young or middle-aged protagonists.¹ However, the malleability of this kind of comedy, which is both a necessity (Jeffers McDonald 2007: 106) and a virtue of the genre (Deleyto 2009), has enabled a recent variation to develop successfully within the new context posed by the 'silvering cinema': namely the 'gerontocom'. Borrowing the term from the *Time Out* reviewer Anna Smith (2010), Deborah Jermyn (2014: 114) defines this 'romcom subgenre' as being represented by films that 'centre on (white, heterosexual) older/ageing protagonists embarking on love affairs ... in a culture which typically colonises romance as the province of the young'. As Pamela H. Gravagne (2013: 5) puts it in her study of cinematic visions of ageing, films are 'deeply implicated in the cultural struggle over the way that old age is discursively and materially constructed'. In a way similar to other forms of popular cinema, romantic comedies in particular have the capacity to reflect and, at times, contest anxieties and ideologies that are relevant to their socio-cultural context. In this sense, they can become, in Claire Mortimer's (2010: 145) words, 'a barometer for the aspirations and values at the heart of society'. As a contemporary subgenre of the romantic comedy, the 'gerontocom' is bound to reproduce current views of ageing. In fact, 'gerontocom' both depend on and defy the essentialist discourse of decline and, consequently, they can also foster a constructivist approach to old age.

It is through those films that reproduce a more complex view on ageing, in other words, one that allows for negative aspects of old age to be both recognised and yet re-constructed, that 'the heteroglossia' of old age, as Chivers puts it (2011: xxii), can be embraced. This essay explores the cinematic possibilities of this heteroglossia through a textual reading of Michael Radford's *Elsa & Fred*, a contemporary film released in 2014 that, as a 'gerontocom', helps the romantic comedy be renovated through a 'silvering filter'. In the light of recent theoretical work on cultural representations of ageing (Gullette 2004, 2011; Baars 2012; Whelehan and Gynne 2014) and especially drawing from studies which have looked at cinematic representations of old age (Lipscomb and Marshall 2010; Chivers 2011; Cohen-Shalev 2012; Gravagne 2013), this article examines *Elsa & Fred* by taking into account the strategies through which the film resists and contests the narrative of decline. As will be shown, *Elsa & Fred* surpasses such narrative by using conventions of the romantic comedy, while at the same time evoking other models of old age that are closely related to Rowe and Kahn's (1987) concept of 'successful ageing' and which have also permeated Western societies to date (Timonen 2016: vii). The case study that follows ultimately proves that the combination of the generic conventions of the romantic comedy with the hyper-visibility of the protagonists' agedness in the 'gerontocom' subgenre enables an anti-decline narrative to develop in the 'silvering screen' beyond the parameters of the 'successful ageing' discourse. In this respect, *Elsa & Fred* generates an integrative discourse of ageing that deconstructs stereotypes of older people as inappropriate subjects in stories of love, while at the same time acknowledging, as Jan Baars (2012: 206) maintains, the sense of dignity that is also found in apparently 'unsuccessful' forms of ageing.

***Elsa & Fred*: extending narratives of old age, completing stories of love**

Michael Radford's *Elsa & Fred* was released in 2014 as a re-make of the 2005 Spanish–Argentinian film production *Elsa y Fred*, directed by Marcos Carnevale. Without deviating much from the original script, Radford's Hollywood adaptation of the romance between two older people who become neighbours relies strongly on the marketable presence of Shirley MacLaine and Christopher Plummer in the leading roles.² It is in the contrast between their characters that Radford's *Elsa & Fred* firstly shows its allegiance with the romcom conventions while at the same time departing from them. On the one hand, Elsa (MacLaine) and Fred (Plummer) epitomise the typical contrasted, even incongruous, couple of the classic romantic comedy. This is a strategy which romcom theorists trace back to the Shakespearean comedies (Mortimer 2010: 10), and which not only ensures many of the gags in the film, but also paves the way for the comic suspense of the entire narrative. Thus, the first sequences present Fred as an ill-tempered and almost alienated older man who, months after his wife's death, is forced by his over-protective daughter to move to a smaller apartment, and loathes anything or anyone that interferes with his lonely, predominantly meaningless routines. For her part, Elsa, Fred's next-door neighbour in his new building, is presented as an overtly optimistic and even reckless older woman with a clear tendency to fantasise, and also to break the rules. When Elsa's car accidentally crashes against that of Fred's teenage grandson, and she asks the boy to keep the incident secret before

driving her car away to the sound of rap music, the film's opening conflict is announced. More interestingly, the promise of a troubling first encounter between the two protagonists is established.

The incongruity created by Elsa's and Fred's opposed personalities and, more symbolically, by the car-crash scene, evokes the clash of worlds on which the rom-com genre depends in order to create its expected sense of disruption – which, in Radford's film, basically has to do with 'the effect of one half of the couple on the life of the other' (Mortimer 2010: 72). However, Fred and Elsa's seeming incompatibility also epitomises the frontal clash between two ways of understanding old age. Hence, Fred's characterisation nourishes the stereotype of 'the grumpy old man' through his self-imposed, yet unsatisfying, isolation, his passive, self-centred behaviour and his predominantly resentful mood. By contrast, Elsa keeps her very frail health condition to herself, and instead displays a vital facet of herself in public that enables her to be constantly engaged with the world. Within the framework of critical gerontology, Fred's hypochondriac obsessions, social alienation and bitter outbursts, which lead him to define himself as 'the rare case' of a 'dead [man], living', typically evoke, in a metaphorical way, the character's internalisation of the narrative of decline. From a cinematic perspective, Redford depicts this internalisation with shots of Fred lying down, or close shots of the character in front of the mirror of the bathroom cabinet where he keeps all his medicines. The cinematic signs that signify Fred's discontent with himself and his life align the character with other films that feature male elders in the leading roles, such as *About Schmidt*, *Red* or even Bergman's *Wild Strawberries*, and which, as noted by Robert E. Yahnke (2010: 265), exploit the trope of 'death in life' in order to explain the self-limiting routines of older male figures who share a similar feeling of uselessness and despair in their later years. Clearly contrasted to this somehow gender-specific portrayal of old age, Elsa's hopeful attitude and resourceful lifestyle, and her rejection of being categorised as 'elderly', follow, instead, a model of 'active ageing'. Thus, in her imitation of Rowe and Khan's (1987) paradigm, Elsa is constantly involved in all kinds of activities, enjoys her full cognitive capacities – including a comic tendency to fabricate stories about herself – and, albeit more problematically, overtly displays her willingness to 'mock death', as she says Picasso once taught her to do. Her positive view of life and of herself are cinematically reflected through a close shot of the figure in which she puts on make-up in front of her mirror before visiting her new neighbour, thereby creating a visual contrast with Fred's pessimistic attitude and facial expression in a similar shot.

Despite representing opposed models of ageing and, hence, of living, Elsa and Fred are bound together by the narrative imperative of the genre – which in this case follows the formulaic model of 'unrequited love', that is, the narrative form through which 'one half of the couple [Elsa] realizes their love for the other early on, but the other half [Fred] is slow to recognize and return their love' (Mortimer 2010: 5). Through this formula, the contrasted models of ageing represented by hero and heroine become intertwined and, hence, reciprocally re-defined. This interconnection is triggered by a domestic accident that forces Fred to ask Elsa for help, and that is framed within the 'trope of embarrassment' that is frequently found in the genre. From that moment onwards, Fred starts to develop a different perspective on what life can still offer to him. Elsa, for her part, arranges a series of

dates with Fred that comply with the social script of 'successful ageing'; yet, she ends up admitting her extremely fragile health condition to him, which she had always kept in secret. The scene that triggers Fred and Elsa's love story already contains the seeds of the ambivalent portrayal of old age which, together, they eventually depict: through the *clichéd* use of wet clothes while Elsa is trying to stop the water outburst in Fred's kitchen, the sequence is imbued with the mixture of desire and fragility. This combination is again underlined when Fred has to help Elsa stand up with a typically romantic gesture that connotes, at the same time, Elsa's physical defencelessness as well as Fred's disempowerment and newfound freedom as a recently widowed older man. Through this sequence and the following ones, the fusion of Fred's and Elsa's conceptions of ageing into a mixed model of old age solves the paradox that is initially created by the characters' opposed characterisations, and which, as in all romantic comedies, in Mortimer's (2010: 6) words, renders each of the figures 'incomplete, and imperfect, until they are ultimately united with each other'.

Elsa and Fred's fusion into a more integrated view of old age ultimately enables the two characters, and especially Fred, to overcome, 'their own ageist attitudes toward [their own] old bodies and behavior' to the extent of finding them 'attractive and desirable', as Gravagne (2013: 96) puts it with regard to other films on desire and old age. Some of the conventions of the romantic genre highlight the affirmative portrayal of old age that Radford's film promotes. Hence, the typically urban setting of most romantic comedies (Mortimer 2010: 9), which in *Elsa & Fred* is specified through the city of New York, offers the two main figures multiple possible leisure activities associated with romance, such as going to restaurants ornamented with the visual signs of the genre, like flowers or candlelight (Jeffers McDonald 2007: 11). The guitar music that is used both diegetically – through Fred's guitar – and non-diegetically in order to frame some of the romantic sequences, also contributes to the formulaic narrative of Fred and Elsa's romance. Finally, although there are no explicit sex scenes in the film, Elsa and Fred are shown waking up together in two different sequences, and kissing or dancing romantically in two more scenes that suggest both the sentimental and sexual dimensions of their relationship.

Significantly enough, all the iconographic components that render Elsa and Fred the leading couple of a love story and which, therefore, transcend their age, or rather, integrate it in the story through an enriching 'silvering filter', contain, at the same time, other signs that remind characters and viewers of the ageist environment in which the love story is set. For example, the stranger yelling at the two protagonists from a balcony and calling them 'grandpa' and 'grandma' while they are immersed in an argument is a clear sign of age-based stigmatisation within the characters' public domain; or, similarly, when Elsa is not allowed to register at a dance course she would like to take with Fred because she is deemed too old, the effects of ageism are once more shown in the film. In the domestic domain, both characters are patronised by their adult children, who perpetuate the biomedical view of old age that has characterised the construction of ageing in the modern world (Kaufman 2010: 225). Likewise, Elsa's and Fred's financial resources are also under the surveillance of their offspring, and mostly to the children's advantage, thereby showing the disciplinary potential of age which, as Stephen Katz (1996) revealed in his Foucaultian study, can be used to demean and, ultimately, control

older people. Even more secondary characters that act as ‘confidantes’ of the couple and who, as such, are stock figures of the genre – like the building’s handyman and Fred’s best friend – are somehow prejudiced against the couple, insofar as they are astonished to discover they have a love life.

Neither Fred nor Elsa are presented as ‘victims’ of these various manifestations of ageism, but quite the opposite: they rebel against them in different ways, or even use their agedness to their own advantage. This is mostly enacted through the lens of comedy, as when Elsa persuades Fred to leave a restaurant without paying for their extremely expensive dinner, because nobody ‘will notice two innocuous old people leaving like that’. Fred and Elsa’s ‘performance of their old age’ in this sequence shows the extent to which age and ageing are socially and culturally constructed. On the whole, Elsa and Fred’s mutual transformation helps them understand that, in the words of Lipscomb and Marshall (2010: 1–2), ‘age is both a performance and performative’, inasmuch as it greatly depends on the actions we decide to associate with it, as well as on the repetitions of those actions and the so-called ‘reality of age’ they help generate. For instance, Fred’s deciding to play the guitar again years after he severed his wrist suggests both the transformative power of love in his later years and the possibility of enjoying the pleasures of an imperfect body in the last stage of life. By the same token, other narrative and generic features of the romcom interact with the film’s discourse of ageing in order to generate ‘another reality of age’.

Of all these elements, *Elsa & Fred*’s resort to filmic intertextuality is the formal strategy that creates this ‘alternative reality’ most effectively, namely one which disrupts the Newtonian concept of time – closely associated with the narrative of decline through its emphasis on materiality and finitude – and replaces it, instead, with the composite, subjective and embodied time of metacinematic referentiality. Thus, the film opens with a brief sequence of Elsa watching Federico Fellini’s *La dolce vita*, the 1960 classic that contains her most longed-for romantic fantasy: re-creating the iconic scene between Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni at the Fontana di Trevi.³ The climax of the intertextual relationship between *Elsa & Fred* and Fellini’s film is attained when Fred, having learnt that Elsa is approaching the end of her life, and responding to the generic ‘race against time’ of many romantic comedies (Mortimer 2010: 5), decides to make Elsa’s fantasy come true. In a series of sequences filmed in Rome, Elsa and Fred appear dressed up like Ekberg’s and Mastroianni’s characters and re-enact their actions and dialogue in exactly the same locations of the most famous scenes of *La dolce vita*. Once at the Fontana, the sequence’s montage moves from the ‘real’, ‘aged’ world of the two lovers, filmed in colour, to the ‘ageless fantasy’ of their black-and-white Fellinian universe. Through this cinematographic effect, the viewer is invited to contemplate Fred’s, and especially, Elsa’s ageing bodies as a collage of subjectivities and times, in which past and present are amalgamated, and the characters’ ‘reality of what they are’ and their ‘desire to be’ become fused and crystallised.

This crystallisation is not, however, devoid of imperfection: the nostalgic fantasy is not enacted in the sensuous atmosphere of a summer evening, but amidst the coldness of a winter night; and, more comically, the little cat that Fred, emulating Mastroianni, manages to catch on the street, is only ‘almost white’, and he feeds him with some yogurt because it was too late to buy some milk. The limitations

of this 'quasi-perfect' fantasy have to do with the realistic ideology of the film, and the implied necessity to underline the limits of a late-life adventure, especially when one of the lovers is seriously ill. In fact, the prospect of Elsa's approaching death is ambivalently introduced in both a realistic and romanticised way when, in an explosion of excitement, Elsa (playing Anita) invites Fred (as her Marcello) to join her in the fountain. When Fred complains he could die of pneumonia, Elsa responds: 'Would this be such a terrible place to die?' Through Elsa's capacity to 'mock death' and show Fred, at the same time, 'the path to life' at what is both the peak and end of their relationship, the film manages to unite both the pulse of death and the pulse of life that are usually represented as opposed narrative forces. Hence, the metacinematic performance of the two ageing characters transforms the typical association of the Fontana di Trevi with sensuality, beauty and youth, into a symbolic site in which the presence of death is not contradictory with attraction, love and a sense of joy. In fact, the entire sequence at the iconic fountain succeeds in liberating the two protagonists from the narrative of decline that is closely connected with a sequential conception of time, and substitutes it with a metacinematic 'chronotope', to use the Bakhtinian concept, in which virtual and actual images have the same value. In this way, Radford underscores the figures' subjective fusion of time and space, dismantles the Cartesian division between their external and internal identities – including the binary young/old – and, in so doing, emphasises not what the characters 'are' or 'were', or even what they 'will be', but, simply, their possibility of 'becoming' at the very last stages of their lives. Coherent with this view, and instead of choosing the expected final triumph of life over death, or of love or humour over adversity (Mortimer 2010: 69), the end of the film emphasises Elsa and Fred's deeply felt gratitude for their love story and the late-life gift it has entailed for both of them. This is shown when they mutter the words 'thank you, thank you' to each other in their last romantic, Fellinian embrace, which soon fades into to their 'newly coloured' reality, in which Elsa's death will finally occur. Through the ambivalent combination of love and death in the final sequences of its narrative, the ending of *Elsa & Fred* resembles the more complex and downbeat conclusions of the radical romantic comedies of the 1970s (Mortimer 2010: 91), and creates, at the same time, an affirmative portrayal of old age in which joy, fragility and romance are closely interwoven.

Conclusion: *Elsa & Fred* and the 'silvering' innovation of the 'gerontocom'

As has been shown, *Elsa & Fred* may be regarded as a cinematic repository of complementary views of ageing that transcend polarised age ideologies of decline and success. Whereas the film's depiction of the protagonists' old age in its personal and social dimensions helps audiences become more aware of the decline narrative and its association with ageist ideologies, its alignment with the romcom subgenre enhances the image of older people as sexual and, especially, as romantic beings. In this respect, Radford's film reminds viewers of all ages that love stories are not the exclusive 'province of the young', to return to Deborah Jermyn's (2014: 114 phrase), and that, in fact, the need for partnership, love and sex continue to be an important part of the later years. At the same time, the film's depiction of fragility in old age

and its deviation from the genre's formulaic 'happy ending' through Elsa's eventual passing prevents Radford's comedy from reproducing a superficial version of the paradigm of 'successful ageing'. In this respect, the ending of *Elsa & Fred* offers a meaningful portrait of ageing that does not regard illness, dependence or even death as 'a failure', and which, therefore, as Jan Baars (2012: 207) contends in his critique of the 'successful' model, allows for 'a more positive inclusion of ageing in life and society'.

Films like *Elsa & Fred* do not only enrich the narrative of old age on the big screen, but also renovate the romcom subgenre itself by opening the narrative of love to characters (and viewers) of all ages. In addition, they also contribute to the ongoing popularity of the romantic comedy itself, as 'gerontocoms' that have turned out to be real box-office successes actually demonstrate. From a cinematic point of view, in fact, one could say that the introduction of old age into the romantic comedy is what is actually taking the genre into fresher territory. If, as Gravagne (2013: 8) contends, '[p]erhaps the most enjoyable [and, one could add, necessary] movies to critique are those that openly embrace the ambiguity, unpredictability and vulnerability of ageing by allowing the ongoing becoming of the old to take center stage', *Elsa & Fred*, like its original version, proves an interesting 'gerontocom' through the aesthetic and ideological viewpoints it offers. Hopefully, the popularity and future study of other films of this subgenre on the emerging 'silvering screen' will gradually render them significant narratives in our ageing societies, thereby making us all, in Gullette's (2011) terms, a bit more 'age-wise', as film viewers, consumers of culture and protagonists of our own lives.

Notes

1 The 'early' romantic comedies, that is, those produced in the 1930s and 1940s often within the subgenre of the 'screwball comedy', and even those labelled as 'sex comedies' in the 1950s and 1960s, used to close with the formulaic wedding between the (young or young-middle-aged) protagonists. Hence, through those endings, viewers were led to imagine that the two main characters continued to 'live happily ever after' beyond the limits of the cinematic narrative, but never got to see their love stories develop into the protagonists' later years. Undermining the innovations of the radical comedies of the 1970s, the neotraditional comedies of the last three decades favour again the final union of the (young) leading couple. In their neotraditional version, the 'happily suspended ending' of most contemporary 'romcoms' continues to postpone the ageing process of the films' protagonists and, therefore, it renders their old age invisible and even unimaginable to the audiences.

2 Coherent with the reviewers' (and viewers') tendency to praise actors they have followed for decades, the film's well-known cast precisely earned the American version the most positive part of the mixed reviews it received. The notions of predictability and sentimentality, which are typically associated with popular genres and with the romcom in particular, underlie most of the negative reviews (see e.g. the reviews at <http://www.filmaffinity.com/es/film190019.html>).

3 This is not the only Fellinian film to which *Elsa & Fred* is indebted. The film's title, in fact, creates another connection with Fellini's last film, *Ginger and Fred* (1986), which is at the same time a metacinematic reference to the classic Hollywood couple formed by the actor-dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers through the leading roles played by Marcello Mastroianni and Giuletta Massina as two impersonators of the Hollywood stars. Even though *Elsa & Fred* does not make any explicit reference to this film, its indirect presence can be traced not only through the coincidence between the two film titles and through Elsa's obsession with the Fellinian universe, but also through Elsa's fondness for dancing and the aged dancing couple that she and Fred end up forming in the privacy of their apartments.

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