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The Politics of Aging in the May–December Romance Plot

TIMOTHY SHARY

As with most narrative plots, romance thrives on conflict, at least in the movies, and one of the most enduring types of romantic conflict arises from two lovers with great age differences. The tensions around such differences are not often socially problematic when the partners are both in their later years, say over 50. Yet in cases where younger people pair off with people much older than a few years, certain concerns tend to arise about the younger person being exploited by the elder. And in cases where the elderly themselves pair off with people more than 20 years younger, there is an altogether different set of questions: How long will the older person live? Is the younger person pursuing the older person for ulterior reasons, such as financial gain? Does the older person have the same sexual stamina as the younger person? And why can't these people simply find lovers who are closer to their own age? After all, there just seems something taboo about cross-generational romance.

In my research on the elderly in American cinema, I examine how characters over the age of 60 are typically represented, although defining the age of the so-called geriatric is rather arbitrary, and elongating by year.¹ After all, in 1900 U.S. white males had a life expectancy of only 48 years at birth, and by 2000 that had risen to an astonishing 75 years.² So certainly at the start of the 20th century, when American cinema was just beginning, the idea of old age was quite different from what we think of today, and ideas about how older people live were quite different as well. There were then not nearly as many older people in assisted care situations, not nearly as much medication and medical attention given to the elderly to prolong their lives, and most significantly in terms of my research, there was not nearly as much visibility of older characters in movies and media at large. In dealing with the May–December romance for this essay, I am not simply defining the two ends of the age spectrum as vaguely “young and old” but more specifically as teens-twenties to late 30s or more, or most specifically, an age difference between the two lovers of 20 years or greater.

Granted, the domination of youth in the film market has been rather pronounced since the 1950s, yet despite the fact that we now have more people alive over the age of 65 than

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Notes

¹While “youth” is a difficult age to define, there are at least some markers in American society that provide some guidance, the most determinate of which is “teenager” which is clearly someone between 13 and 19. The term “minor” usually refers to people

under 18, except for alcohol consumption, which applies to those under 21. “Adolescence” is more ambiguous, arguably starting anywhere around 10 and ending around 20, and the “age of consent” for legal sexual practices varies from state to state, ranging from 14 to 18. Thus, I tend to use “young” as a term for characters from 12 into their early 20s (considering that most U.S. students do not finish college until then). The older population needs some markers for social purposes as well, such as retirement, Social Security income, and health guidance, but the range of “old” is even wider than “youth.” For statistical and aid purposes, the United Nations defines the older population as “60+” while the World Health Organization sets the age of an older person as 50 or over. Retirement as determined by companies has a very wide range, with ages ranging from 55 to 75, and the AARP—formerly known as the American Association of Retired Persons but now simply an organization for older Americans—allows membership at age 50. Full retirement benefits from Social Security for someone born in 1937 and prior is 65, yet for someone born in 1960 or later the age is now 67—demonstrating how even the federal government changes the older age range. Thus, I consider the “elderly” as characters 60 and over, and use the term interchangeably with “geriatric.” A more complete consideration of these issues can be found in: Hajime Orimo, “Reviewing the Definition of ‘Elderly’,” *Geriatrics & Gerontology International* 6.3 (2006): 149–158. Print.

²In 1900 the average U.S. white male had a life expectancy at birth of only 48 years, and for black males the age was a woefully low 33 years. By 2000, the age for white and black males had risen to an astonishing 75 years. See *The Information Please Database*, Pearson, accessed June 15, 2012. Web.

³In 2010, the estimated portion of the U.S. population aged 65 and older was 13%; in 1900 that portion was 4.1%. Emily Brandon, “65-and-Older Population Soars,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 9. 2012, 17. Print.

⁴Martha Lauzen and David Dozier, “Maintaining the Double Standard: Portrayals of Age and Gender in Popular Films,” *Sex Roles* 52.7-8 (2005): 437–446. Print.

⁵MPAA Worldwide Market Research and Analysis, “2005 U.S. Movie Attendance Study,” Motion Picture Association of America, accessed Jan. 27, 2007. Web.

⁶Carrie Rickey, review of *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Village Voice*, Sept. 14, 1982: 48. Print.

⁷Morton Keller, *Affairs of State: Public Life in Late Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 465. Print.

⁸Joe Queenan offers a humorous and detailed comparison of the film *Manhattan* and other May–December romances to Woody's Allen's personal life in the early '90s, when he left his long-term partner Mia Farrow for her adopted teenage daughter (his stepdaughter), leading to an enormous amount of ironic controversy for the director in "Baby Love," *Movieline*, Oct. 2002: 41–44, 93. Print.

⁹There are at least two May–December romance films that I have not mentioned, for reasons of irrelevance: Don Henderson's *Weekend with the Babysitter* (1970), a forgettable exploitation piece that is unavailable for viewing, and Amy Heckerling's *I Could Never Be Your Woman* (2007), a direct-to-DVD production that, despite a well-known director and cast, garnered very little attention. There may be more examples out there, and I invite suggestions for future research.

¹⁰These statistics are from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2011, prepared by the Chief of the Bureau of Statistics, Treasury Department (Washington, D.C.: U.S. G.P.O.).

¹¹L.I.E. is different from films like Todd Solondz's *Happiness* (1998) and Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin* (2004), in which older men do have sexual relations with boys, but the relationships are essentially unromantic.

¹²Nick Roddick, review of *Class*, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Oct. 1983: 273. Print.

¹³Roger Ebert, review of *Lost in Translation*, *Chicago Sun Times*, Sept. 12, 2003: G7. Print.

¹⁴David Considine, *The Cinema of Adolescence* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985), 258. Print.

¹⁵All of these romance movies received over 50,000 votes by viewers on the Internet Movie Database rating them 7 out of 10 or higher; only 0.03% of all movies (695) have ratings of 7 or higher with over 50,000 votes out of 216,000 movies in the survey.

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