

3-24-2014

Representations of Middle Age in Comedy Film: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Recommended APA Citation

Gatling, M., Mills, J., & Lindsay, D. (2014). Representations of Middle Age in Comedy Film: A Critical Discourse Analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(12), 1-15. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss12/1>

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Abstract

The discourse of middle age includes a commonly-held perception that it is a time of crisis resulting in unusual, atypical, dramatic or extravagant behaviours. The aim of this study was to find out if the discourse of middle age, as depicted in comedy film, supports this stereotype. Three comedy films were reviewed using dispositive analysis to critically-evaluate the actions, objects and language employed to represent middle age on-screen. The findings show that crisis, sparked by a fear of ageing and with some distinct gender differences, is a frequent feature of on-screen middle age. Building on the generally accepted hypothesis that negative stereotyping results in the development of prejudices, the findings suggest that negative representations of ageing start well before old age and therefore contribute to the process whereby film audiences are inculcated with material which engenders ageist views and behaviours.

Keywords

Middle Age, Mid-Life Crisis, Comedy Film, Dispositive Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis

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Acknowledgements

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Representations of Middle Age in Comedy Film: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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The discourse of middle age includes a commonly-held perception that it is a time of crisis resulting in unusual, atypical, dramatic or extravagant behaviours. The aim of this study was to find out if the discourse of middle age, as depicted in comedy film, supports this stereotype. Three comedy films were reviewed using dispositive analysis to critically-evaluate the actions, objects and language employed to represent middle age on-screen. The findings show that crisis, sparked by a fear of ageing and with some distinct gender differences, is a frequent feature of on-screen middle age. Building on the generally accepted hypothesis that negative stereotyping results in the development of prejudices, the findings suggest that negative representations of ageing start well before old age and therefore contribute to the process whereby film audiences are inculcated with material which engenders ageist views and behaviours. Keywords: Middle Age; Mid-Life Crisis; Comedy Film; Dispositive Analysis; Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

The ability of media such as film and television to influence viewers and promulgate inaccurate “knowledge” is well-documented (Anderson et al., 2003; Cohen-Shalev & Marcus, 2007; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). The key aim of comedy films is to amuse and entertain hence a film about an uneventful, unproblematic mid-life without crises to trigger hilarious plot points would be unlikely to succeed at the box office. Comedy films about mid-life, therefore, show a period fraught with problems, feeding preconceptions that it is a time of crisis. As Horton and Rapf (2012) note, “screen comedy has been free to work its complex and often subversive process, revealing and commenting on the preoccupations, prejudices, and dreams of societies that produce it” (p. 5). In the case of comedy films about middle age, fear of ageing and anticipation of crises is the preoccupation. This fear is fed by films that portray stereotypical representations, situations and behaviours for the amusement of audiences. Though researchers and psychologists find that both men and women experience changes, these changes are not necessarily crises (Boston, 2006; Lachman, 2004; Lachman, Lewkowicz, Marcus, & Peng, 1994). Many films about mid-life, however, concern crisis rather than transition.

A growing body of research is highlighting the negative effects of ageism on the health and well-being of older people (Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000; Palmore, 2005) and, as noted above, stereotyping in the media contributes to the development of ageist views. There is a paucity of research however, investigating media representations of middle age. This paper, which is part of a larger study about representations of age and ageing in comedy film, will provide insight into how middle age is portrayed. We suggest that the discourse about middle age in comedy films shows it to be a time of crisis sparked by fears about ageing. Thus the discourse of middle age feeds into the discourse of “old age,” which is largely negative and emphasises declining abilities, deteriorating health and reduced opportunities and status.

This paper is one of several papers included in a PhD thesis submitted by Margaret Gatling. The thesis examines how age and ageing are represented in the genre of comedy film. The purpose of the thesis is to alert readers to the possibility that they might be exposed to insidious indoctrination of ageist stereotyping by simply watching the most popular film genre – comedy. This particular study of middle age in film demonstrates that inaccuracies about the ageing process are promulgated through humour not only in relation to old age but also to middle age.

The researchers are all registered nurses who have a commitment to combatting ageist behaviours and attitudes particularly by health professionals. By virtue of their close connection with nurse education they hope to provide student nurses with the tools to critically evaluate the media they consume. When students are made aware of the prevalence of negative stereotyping of age and the ageing journey they will be better equipped to resist the unquestioning acceptance of those stereotypes.

What is middle age?

The middle age or mid-life of a person occurs between the ages of 40 and 65 years, depending on the dictionary, journal article or book consulted to define the period. Being exact about the beginning and end of middle age is not crucial, however, an essential concept of middle age is that it follows childhood, teenage years and young adulthood, and precedes old age. In 2012, the UK educational website for adults “Love to Learn” commissioned a survey to gauge public opinion on when middle age begins and ends (Pearson, 2012). A large sample of adults over 50 years of age (n=1002) were asked a number of questions about middle age, including when it begins and ends and what the advantages and disadvantages of being middle-aged were. The study found that, based on the mean of responses, middle age begins at 55 and ends just before a person turns 70. In addition to this apparent delay in becoming middle-aged, a large majority of the sample (85 per cent) cited numerous benefits, rather than drawbacks or crises, to being middle-aged. Some of the benefits cited included the following:

- Having the confidence and experience to do more than in younger years
- Being less afraid of making mistakes
- Having the freedom/lack of ties to do what I want, when I want
- Having the time to learn new things/take up new hobbies
- Having greater feelings of happiness than ever before
- Being better off financially (Pearson, 2012)

The above results do shed doubt on the validity of a concept often coupled with middle age – the mid-life crisis. The term, mid-life crisis, was coined by psychologist Elliott Jaques (1965) whose paper “Death and the Mid-life Crisis” discussed his research findings that many composers and artists experienced turmoil and diminished creative productivity in middle age. The term has been taken up by media and has entered popular culture.

According to popular mythology, and backed up by numerous contemporary self-help websites (Kilponen, 2012; Metcalf, 2013; Meyer, 2013), the signs and symptoms of mid-life crisis include depression, dissatisfaction with current lifestyle, regrets over failed ambitions, dissatisfaction with spouse or partner, anxiety over age-related changes in physical appearance, a lack of self-confidence resulting in purchase of items which boost self-image (such as sports cars or motorbikes), a desire to rekindle friendships or experiences enjoyed in youth and a hankering to undertake a road trip to search for new experiences. These signs and symptoms can be distilled into a number of themes, as seen in Table 1:

| Theme | Possible Manifestations |
|---|---|
| Dissatisfaction with current way of life | Lassitude, divorce, affairs, becoming more fashion conscious, purchasing fast cars/bikes, taking up risky sports, leaving job, road trips |
| Regrets over failed expectations | Depression, anger, blame |
| Nostalgia for past youth | Contacting old college/sporting friends, reliving past experiences |
| Unhappiness with physical signs of ageing | Dyeing hair, cosmetic surgery and interventions |

Table 1. Themes and manifestations of mid-life crisis

The themes outlined above were used to guide a methodological analysis of the discourse of middle-age and mid-life crisis in comedy films.

Methodology and method

We analysed the comedy films selected for the study using the dispositive analysis approach of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Dispositive analysis expands elements of discourse to include the non-linguistic elements of non-discursive practices (actions), materialisations (objects) which relate to non-discursive practices and discursive practices – the written and spoken word (Caborn, 2007; Jäger & Maier, 2009). These three elements form a triangle in which linguistic and non-linguistic elements are considered in relation to each other to give a deeper understanding of a discourse than can be provided by considering the language or text alone.

Jäger and Maier suggest that Foucault's approach of bricolage is appropriate for researchers wishing to use dispositive analysis (Jäger & Maier, 2009). Bricolage is defined as a "construction or creation from a diverse range of available things" (Oxford Dictionary, 2013). By using this approach, we were able to "fossick" through a wide range of "things" present in the sample of films to analyse the representation of middle age in comedy films. The process of writing about these observed actions and objects transformed those aspects into text: for example, objects which have become emblematic in the discourse of middle age, such as motorbikes and red sports cars, were changed from being "things" into text and their relationship with the discourse of middle age and mid-life crisis was articulated in language. Figure 1 shows the relationship between discursive practices, non-discursive practices and materialisations in dispositive analysis. The diagram is adapted from Jäger and Maier's diagram of the dispositive (2009, p. 57).

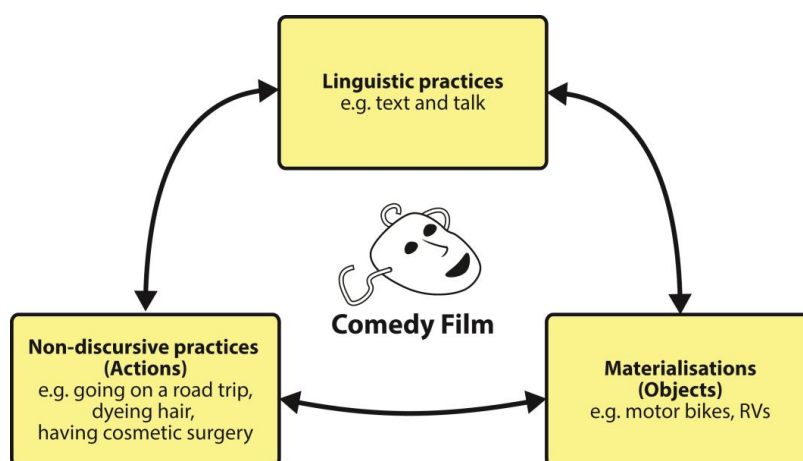


Figure 1 Diagram illustrating dispositive analysis applied to mid-life crisis

Though dispositive analysis has a history going back to Foucault (1979), an explicit method for the approach is still being developed (Jäger & Maier, 2009). In this study the researchers analyse the words characters use in conjunction with actions associated with being middle-aged. The third element of the dispositive triangle – materialisations – is also unpacked by considering and textualising any objects used in the film to signify or relate to mid-life.

A corpus of three films was chosen for analysis on the basis of the metadata. The following metadata were used to select films: synopsis found on the IMDb film database, description on the DVD cover and reviews by both professional and “interested amateur” reviewers. The selected films were relatively popular in terms of box office financial success; they were easily accessible to the public and had middle-age-related issues as a central theme. The films chosen have the following plots: a group of restless middle-aged male friends go on a road trip, *Wild Hogs* (Becker, 2009); a middle aged movie star is dissatisfied with his life, *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003); and a divorced woman has a significantly-different experience of mid-life from a middle-aged “lothario,” *Something’s Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003). Each film was watched in DVD format a minimum of five times in its entirety. Selected scenes were viewed several more times until all elements of the dispositive had been noted. The selected scenes featured conversations or fragments of conversations which specifically-concerned aspects of middle age. Objects or actions featured in the films that were significant in the discourse of ageing were also considered, even in the absence of text or talk. Subtitles were turned on to facilitate the researcher’s understanding of dialogue.

The discourse in the chosen scenes was compared with the themes of middle age gleaned from a wide number of self-help websites as described in Table 1 above. One researcher with expertise in critical analysis of film undertook the selection of scenes. She made detailed notes of any linguistic references to middle age and to objects and actions which have significance in the discourse of middle age (for example sports cars or motor bikes).

Analysis of the data

Lost in Translation

Lost in Translation (Coppola, 2003), according to the DVD cover description, concerns Bob - “(a) middle-aged movie star in town to shoot a commercial” and Charlotte - “(a) young woman tagging along with her workaholic husband.” The age difference is flagged from the outset as a central theme, with a tension formed around middle-age and youth. Added to this scenario are the personal issues experienced by Bob – or as a reviewer in *Rolling Stone* magazine puts it, Bob is in Tokyo to “nurse a midlife crisis stemming from an aimless career and marriage” (Travers, 2003, para.2).

The film is set in Tokyo, which is a city neither character has visited in the past. Much of the dialogue is in Japanese with no translation provided for the viewer. This positions those in the audience who do not understand Japanese as outsiders with only non-discursive practices (actions) and materialisations (objects) as clues to what is happening in several scenes. This isolation from much of the spoken discourse co-locates the characters and the viewers as “fish out of water.” Issues concerning middle age and mid-life crisis are discussed or mentioned in the film infrequently however the film’s description labels Bob as being middle-aged, which links the problems he is experiencing to his age group.

The first linguistic reference to Bob’s age occurs in the bar of the hotel (DVD Chapter 9). Bob and Charlotte are sitting next to each other chatting for the first time. They exchange

exploratory questions about why they are in Tokyo which leads to Bob asking Charlotte about her marriage:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Bob | How long have you been married? |
| Charlotte | Mmm. Two years |
| Bob | Twenty-five long ones. |
| Charlotte | You're probably just having a mid-life crisis. Did you buy a Porsche yet? |
| Bob | You know. I was thinking about buying a Porsche |

Table 2. *Lost in Translation* Chapter 9

By adding the descriptor “long ones” to the number of years he has been married, Bob is negatively suggesting that the length of the marriage feels like a long time – that time has dragged by. Charlotte immediately suggests that this feeling can be attributed to a mid-life crisis. By adding the word “just” she implies that Bob’s allusion to being dissatisfied with his marriage is an expected sign of what she considers to be a common event – a mid-life crisis. She immediately refers to the popular myth that mid-life crisis is soothed, if not solved, by the purchase of a fast vehicle. Bob implies Charlotte’s diagnosis is correct by using the same discursive code for mid-life crisis that she has introduced - a hankering after a fast car.

Using dispositive analysis to analyse the portrayal of midlife in *Lost in Translation* is particularly-appropriate because little of the film’s linguistic content refers to Bob’s middle age. Other elements, such as his actions and his interaction with objects relating to the discourse of mid-life crisis must be analysed to assess their significance. This lack of linguistic signposting mirrors the experience of the two main characters who find they must construct meaning from context, hand gestures and body language. For example, in a hospital waiting room scene, Bob and an elderly Japanese man attempt to communicate. Bob repeats the sounds he hears but with no way of linking utterance and meaning he cannot understand what the elderly man is saying.

The comic effect of two men sitting close to each other, trying to communicate but failing, is a reflection of how Bob and his wife are coping with his middle years. Bob’s wife is in America caring for their children and, through various telephone calls and faxes, they are shown in the film to be using instruments of communication but failing to hear what each other is trying to say. This disconnection comes to a head when Bob is away from home. While his wife Lydia is concerned with the busy-ness and minutiae of the present - what shelving and carpet to put in Bob’s office, getting their daughter to eat breakfast, taking the kids to school - Bob is concerned with constant reminders of a past in which his life was happier and more successful and exciting. His life is in transition from a movie career filled with car chases and heroic antics to a lucrative but sedate role in the world of advertising. He is the face and voice of a Japanese whiskey - a role which requires him to wear an evening suit and raise a glass of “whiskey” to his lips and utter the company’s advertising slogan in mellow tones from the safety of a leather armchair.

Language barriers in the film are a backdrop to the uncertainties which preoccupy both middle-aged Bob and the young adult, Charlotte. They are both in a state of confusion about their future and are dissatisfied with their lives. Charlotte is anxious about her career future and her marriage. Whilst not trivialising these issues, Charlotte’s angst needs to be contextualised by noting she has recently graduated from college and has been married for two years. Her symptoms appear to be those of a person facing so many choices that the possibilities are paralysing. Bob’s situation is different. As a middle-aged man, he appears to consider that his most productive and successful years are over. When he is recognised in a bar by two fans, they refer to his earlier film work and how he did all his own driving in car

chase scenes. The contrast is clear and obvious between the past and his current situation, in which an advert director much younger himself instructs him via a translator about the basic details of delivering his single line of dialogue and holding a whiskey glass. In visual terms, he has gone from fast car to armchair. The locus of power is not with the middle-aged former movie star but with the young director, who controls the action and the language.

In *Lost in Translation*, Bob Harris's mid-life is unhappy, which may qualify him as having a "crisis." The main symptom, dissatisfaction with his life, is manifesting itself in a number of ways. The first is that he seems to have lost all drive and energy. The non-discursive practices or actions which alert the viewer to his feelings include his solitary drinking at the hotel bar, the way he sits impassively on the edge of his bed almost paralysed by ennui, his lack of enthusiasm when he is filming the whisky advertisement, and his disengagement from his wife and the activities of his family life. He rarely smiles and often sighs. His aspect and demeanour are that of a depressed man.

In their first meeting, Charlotte refers to one of the most popular stereotypes of mid-life crisis when she asks Bob if he will be buying a Porsche. In a later scene, when Bob turns up for an evening out wearing a yellow and green camouflage print t-shirt, she repeats this diagnosis when she says, "You really are having a mid-life crisis aren't you?" What she means by this remark is understood by Bob to encompass a number of concepts. She, as a young person, has taken control of the situation by playing on the insecurities felt by older people if they tread on unfamiliar territory like fashion trends. What Bob hears Charlotte saying to him is as follows:

- that t-shirt is unattractive and unfashionable
- only someone having a mid-life crisis would choose to wear that t-shirt
- you are middle-aged and you are having a crisis.

In this scene, the t-shirt becomes an object that is part of the discourse of mid-life crisis. Bob feels he has to distance himself from it and immediately turns it inside out. After putting it back on with the tell-tale camouflage pattern on the inside he asks Charlotte to cut off the label. By this action, he allows Charlotte to take control and demonstrates how he is struggling to be himself in the uncertainty of his middle years.

His friendship with Charlotte is not an affair, more like a symbiotic relationship which allows two "strangers in a strange land" to listen to each other's concerns. When Bob has an unplanned sexual encounter with a bar singer, however, Charlotte is disappointed in him and he appears to regret that he did not live up to her expectations. As a result, she attempts to hurt him with the main weapon in her arsenal, by emphasising their age difference. Charlotte remarks that the bar singer is much nearer Bob's age than she is thus neatly-placing the bar singer and Bob in a group which share common interests and are attracted to each other on the basis of age:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Charlotte | Well, she is closer to your age. You could talk about things you have in common... like, um ... growing up in the 50s. Maybe she liked the movies you were making in the 70s. When you were still making movies. |
| Bob | Wasn't there anyone else there to lavish you with attention? |

Table 3. *Lost in translation*, Chapter 20

Charlotte knows that growing old is a source of anxiety and she is aware that Bob is having difficulty transitioning from successful actor to middle-aged former star. She deliberately refers to Bob's childhood and early adulthood, which occurred before she was born, and she reminds Bob that his film success occurred decades earlier and that time is now long gone. There is an implication that two middle-aged adults would have little to talk about except nostalgia for their past youth. Bob's response to Charlotte appears to accurately pinpoint the reason behind her bitter remarks – she felt neglected and possibly resented the transfer of Bob's attentions from herself- an attractive young woman- to an attractive older woman.

Issues related to being middle aged and experiencing a crisis are evident but are understated in *Lost in Translation*. There is, however, a distinct gloominess about Bob's life that contributes to an impression that he considers that his best days are over. If mid-life is more about transition and evaluation than crisis, as suggested in research (Atkinson, 1995; Freund & Ritter, 2009), then his life appears to be transitioning into something less satisfying, rather than just something different.

Wild Hogs (Becker, 2009)

“Wild Hogs” is the name that four middle aged friends from Cincinnati call their motorcycle “gang.” In the eponymous film, this gang name is an ironic inversion of the tamedness of their lives. The DVD cover describes the film as a “laugh-out-loud comedy your whole family will go wild over.” The discourse of middle age in this film is about dissatisfaction and underachievement - a feeling of not having the adventurous and exciting job or life that beckoned when the characters were younger. ABC film critic, Margaret Pomerantz (2011), describes the film as being about “four middle-aged men at varying points of crisis in their lives” (opening line). The compensatory salve for this feeling is the significant emblem of male mid-life crisis – a motor bike. The four middle-aged heroes of this family film are Doug – a dentist whose idea of excitement is using the “powerful little sucker” while working on clients' teeth; Bobby – a plumber who has given up work for a year in pursuit of his dream of writing a self-help book; Dudley – an information technology programmer who is uncoordinated, insecure and unable to find a girlfriend; and Woody - ostensibly a rich and successful businessman with a beautiful “swimsuit model” wife (but, in reality, his wife has left him and he is financially-ruined).

Lost in Translation was praised for its subtle humour and understated characterisations and won three Golden Globe awards and an Oscar. *Wild Hogs*, on the other hand, has not garnered many accolades from critics but audiences appeared to like its slapstick comedy style. The film grossed nearly \$40 million at the box office in its opening weekend (IMDb). The humour relies on the use of several stereotypes including violent and menacing bikies, incompetent and poorly-trained country-town police officers, shrill and bossy wives, and male mid-lifers in a state of crisis and restless dissatisfaction. Specifically, middle-age is represented in *Wild Hogs* using one of the stereotypical behaviours or actions attributed to this “condition:” going on a road trip to escape the confines of everyday life by embracing the freedom of the open road. The language centres around a fear of ageing and a feeling of frustration that family and work obligations have thwarted the fulfilment of personal dreams and aspirations. The materialisations or objects supporting the discourse of male middle-age are motor bikes and leather jackets. Dispositive analysis of how middle age is represented in this film reveals it to be about a time of crisis which necessitates certain actions to be taken to soothe the symptoms.

Wild Hogs introduces the main characters of the film as they ride together to their regular haunt - a bar run by and frequented by bikers. Like many events in the film, the status of the Wild Hogs is a charade: Woody's marriage to a beautiful model exists in name only,

Doug's desire to be addressed as "doctor" covers his disappointment at being a dentist, and Bobby's year off to write a self-help book is merely an excuse not to earn his living by unblocking toilets. "Wild Hogs aren't welcome here," snarls the owner of the Wild Hogs' favourite bar; the line is just a well-rehearsed greeting to make the urban would-be bikies feel more macho. The bar owner is playing out a scene in which he pretends to see four trouble-makers, not a group of middle-aged men acting out a fantasy.

The first scene where one of the four men is openly-teased about being middle-aged is in a scene when Doug tells his wife, Kelly, and son, Billy, about a road trip proposed by Woody as an antidote to the confinement and oppression of their sedate middle-age:

| | |
|--------------|---|
| Kelly | Do you wanna talk about going on this ride? |
| Doug | I can't go on a cross-country trip. I can't walk away from work anytime I want. |
| Kelly | Yeah, you know what, you're right. It's just as well. Road trips probably aren't the best thing for a guy your age. I mean, it's gotta be really inconvenient. Bunch of middle-aged guys having to get off their bikes every 20 minutes to take a pee... |
| Doug | My age? What kind of crack is that? What's wrong with my age? She talks like I'm not right here, you know? |
| Kelly | Doug, I'm joking. |
| Doug | No, you know what I think? I think you think I'm a boring guy. I'm old and I'm boring now. I've become lame. I think everybody thinks that at this table. I'm lame! Admit it! I'm lame! |
| Kelly | Doug, calm down it's OK. |
| Doug | No, I'm not gonna calm down. You know what I think? "Calming down" means another word for "lame!" I'm not lame! You know, I'm wild and free! Wild and free and a man, yeah! |

Table 4. *Wild Hogs* from 14 mins 19 secs

In this scene, Doug's wife exaggerates the effects and incidence of urinary problems in middle-aged men. In Australia, about one in seven men over the age of 40 experience difficulties with bladder-emptying, related to enlargement of the prostate (Frydenberg, 2013) but Kelly's jibe suggests that all four Wild Hogs have the condition. During this conversation, both adults address their comments to their young son. When his mother talks about middle men having to "take a pee," she smiles and nods her head slightly and the boy chuckles. Like many young boys, he obviously appreciates humour concerning bodily functions. The mother introduces her son to a stereotype of middle-aged men and the boy has no way of knowing whether it is true. There are two possibilities: middle-aged men do urinate every 20 minutes and his mother finds this amusing or his mother has made something up or exaggerated something as a joke. In the real world, children watching this film this might, for the first time, be exposed to the concept that middle-age is problematic, at least for men. Doug does nothing to help dispel this idea when he makes a leap from being middle-aged to being old and furthermore, he links being old to being boring and "lame." As Doug's anxiety about being old, boring and lame escalates his behaviour changes from that of a rational adult

to a naughty and defiant child. He drinks gravy straight from the gravy boat and chews on a stick of butter. He grabs food, which is forbidden on his low cholesterol diet, and stuffs it crudely into his mouth. The low cholesterol diet is another hint that middle age is fraught with health issues. Doug is trying to assert power over his middle-age and dispute that he has become a boring quasi-invalid, yet his actions show him to be in a state of crisis and he is seemingly-powerless to address it. In the following scene, Doug is in the emergency room of the hospital and is informed by the doctor that he has had a panic attack. The doctor states that “we see this a lot in middle-aged men” thus normalising the notion of mid-life crisis.

The main female characters in the film, although ostensibly in the same age group as their husbands, do not display any signs or symptoms of mid-life crisis. Doug’s wife is rational and calm and when she realises his panic attack is the result of pent-up anxieties relating to fear of ageing and family responsibilities he feels he must shoulder she encourages him to take the road trip. Bobby’s wife is represented as the dominant partner in the marriage and her actions show her as capable and focussed. A different view of what middle-age is like for women is presented in the third film discussed in this paper: *Something’s Gotta Give* (Meyers, 2003).

Something’s Gotta Give (Meyers, 2003)

Erica Barry is a successful playwright in her 50s. Played by Diane Keaton, Erica is slim, attractive and intelligent but because she is a middle-aged woman she is invisible to men of her own age and lives more or less contentedly on her own. Invisibility is a theme in the discourse of ageing, particularly in the experience of women. Anecdotally, women talk of being invisible from middle-age onwards. This invisibility includes being overlooked when shopping in stores and being by-passed in favour of younger women at social functions. Academic research also supports the notion of women becoming “invisible” as they age. In a US phenomenological study, one of the themes that emerged from interviews with middle-aged women participants was invisibility, which they expressed as “disregard, not being seen by others, or overlooked in daily activities” (Wiggs, Young, Mastel-Smith, & Mancuso, 2011, p. 21). For some women, the invisibility created by being middle-aged has implications for their careers as it renders them ineligible to be in the public eye. This type of “invisibility” was the case for four BBC presenters. The four women, all aged in their 40s and 50s, were axed from their roles because it was deemed they did not fit with the image of the *Countryfile* program when it moved to a prime-time slot. An age discrimination tribunal later awarded compensation to one of the women on the grounds that she had been unfairly deprived of her role because of her age (Plunkett, 2011).

In contrast to Erica’s comfortable but celibate middle-age, Harry Sanborn is a 63-year-old wealthy bachelor who only dates women under 30 and has stuck to that rule ever since he was a young man. He is played by Jack Nicholson and is described on the DVD cover as being a perennial *playboy* [my italics]. Sanborn looks nothing like a boy. He looks like Jack Nicholson: overweight, jowly and balding, however, in the film, he is dating Erica’s daughter, Marin, who is in her 20s and very attractive. The contrast in opportunities for romance open to Erica and Harry is apparent to Erica’s sister, Zoe, who is a university lecturer specialising in women’s studies. In a scene where Erica and Zoe are having dinner with Harry and Marin, Zoe realises that Harry is the celebrated bachelor she has read about, famous for having, as the article put it, “escaped the noose” of marriage. Zoe compares Harry’s and Erica’s lives in the analysis that follows:

| | |
|--------------|--|
| Zoe | You've been around the block a few times. What are you, around..? |
| Harry | Sixty-three |
| Zoe | Fantastic! Never married, which, as we know, if you were a woman, would be a curse. You'd be an old maid, a spinster. So, instead of pitying you, they write articles about you. Celebrate your never marrying. You're elusive and ungettable, a real catch. Then there's my gorgeous sister here. |
| Erica | No, wait... |
| Zoe | No, this is interesting. Look at her. She is so accomplished, the most successful woman playwright since who? Lillian Hellman? She's over fifty, divorced and still sits in night after night because the available guys her age want...--forgive me, honey, for saying this, but they want girls that look like Marin so the whole over-fifty dating scene is geared completely towards men leaving older women out and, as a result, that makes the older women more and more productive and more and more interesting, which, in turn, makes them even less desirable because, as we all know, men, especially older men, are threatened and deathly afraid of interesting and accomplished women. It's just so clear. Single older women, as a demographic, are as fucked a group as can ever exist. |

Table 5. *Something's Gotta Give*, Chapter 5 from 13 mins 15 seconds

These observations by Zoe sum up Erica's and Harry's sexual relationships and also reflect what has been happening on-screen for decades; older men, whatever their appearance, can be paired with younger women but older women become increasingly invisible. Ironically, Zoe's statement that single older women are as "fucked a group as can ever exist" could more accurately have "un" placed in front of the descriptor for the "group." It is important to note that, although the discourse of middle age does include invisibility, middle-aged and older women, in reality, have not resigned from their sexuality and sexual activity. Studies show that being older and possibly post-menopausal liberates women and they report that their interest in sex is far from diminished (Gledhill, 2011; Meah, Hockey, & Robinson, 2011; Scott, 2002).

In *Something's Gotta Give*, Erica Barry favours high necked sweaters, which Harry interprets as both a sign of repression and a way of hiding her neck - an area where signs of ageing skin are often noticeable. The turtleneck sweater is a significant object in the discourse of middle age for women; for other women, a carefully-draped scarf provides protection from critical eyes. Thus, Harry appears to be correct in his assumption that Erica has issues about her middle-aged body. When Harry accidentally wanders into her bedroom when she is naked, the shock is extreme for both of them. Harry throws up his arms and shields his eyes from the sight "as if to avoid an anthrax attack" (Chivers, 2011, p. 133) while Erica screams and desperately tries to cover herself. Her response to this incident is to retreat further behind clothing by donning sunglasses, a low brimmed hat and a long coat. Harry's interpretation of an older female body as something shocking and repugnant is ironic given his own portly body - a physique which apparently attracts numerous attractive young women. "I've never seen a woman that age naked before," Harry later tells his doctor,

shuddering, as if he is still suffering from shock at the memory of this experience. He does not elaborate on which aspect of Erica's body upset him but when the physician expresses incredulity at this statement, Harry reminds him, "Hey, we're not all doctors, baby," thus, hinting that older women's bodies are damaged and need medical attention. Harry's comments point to the observation that older women are often invisible on-screen yet their bodies, if exposed, are hyper-visible (Meah et al., 2011; Woodward, 1999).

Harry is represented as a sexually-active, 63-year-old man with a penchant for young women as opposed to women of his own generation. As he only dates women under 30, the age difference between himself and his partners widens with every passing year. In the discourse of middle ageing, however, male impotence is a motif. Despite being "a real catch" as Zoe puts it, Harry has to resort to the chemical assistance of Viagra to maintain his reputation as a Casanova. It is one of the few indications in the film that, for a man, middle age has some limitations. For Harry, the only flaw to his middle years appears to be his health. He is taking blood pressure medication, cholesterol-reducing medication and Viagra.

Both of the central characters in *Something's Gotta Give* are middle-aged but neither is experiencing a mid-life crisis, as categorised by the commonly-held stereotypes of road trips, regrets, reunions and risk taking. Even Harry's fondness for women under 30 pre-dates his middle years. What the film does propose is that, for single women, mid-life can be a solitary time with an absence of sexual activity and little hope of finding a partner. In this film at least, middle-aged men control the dating scene and single women of those men's own generation are not invited to participate.

Conclusion

The three films considered represent middle age in different ways. In *Lost in Translation*, middle age is a gloomy time for Bob Harris filled with nostalgia for past achievements and difficulty in accepting the responsibilities of family life. Traditional stereotypes associated with mid-life crisis are referred to by a younger character and Bob's actions confirm her diagnosis. The four *Wild Hogs*, with their motor bikes, leather jackets and failed expectations, need to hit the open road to ride out their mid-life crisis. *Something's Gotta Give* looks at mid-life from the experiences of a single man and a single woman. This film suggests that, for single middle-aged women, opportunities for romantic relationships are reduced and replaced with a focus on careers and independence. What is significant about all three films is that the characters are all suitably-financially well-off to allow for a mid-life crisis. Freed from the anxiety of not being able to feed a family or pay a mortgage, the characters can go on road trips, purchase motor bikes, stay in magnificent hotels and buy Viagra.

For comedy filmmakers, the (over)reactions of a middle-aged person to the realisation that they are no longer "young" provide bountiful opportunities for humorous plots and scenarios. Inter-generational tensions, in the form of jibes from younger people, can contribute to the age-related anxieties exhibited by middle aged characters. It is noted, also, that filmmakers often choose to feature male protagonists rather than female leads as the central character(s), suggesting that, for men, middle age is more problematic than it is for women.

Concentrating on crisis rather than transition allows filmmakers to represent middle age in a comical light rather than a "banal stage of life" (Chivers, 2011, p. xvi). This concentration, however, on the turbulent emotions and consequences of middle age provides audiences with a negative view of ageing. This means that more than half of the human life span, as portrayed in film, is filled with regrets, misfortune and ill health. The media, including the film industry, have the power to influence and even control the discourse of

ageing. Critical analysis of the discursive practices, actions and objects in a small sample of typical comedy films about mid-life indicates that the film industry can, and does, influence societal ageist attitudes from mid-life through to old age. What we “know” about middle age is intrinsically bound-up with things and actions so that, by simply noticing a 45 year old man with a toupee driving a red sports car, the notion of “mid-life crisis” springs to mind.

There has been little research undertaken about how middle age is represented in film. Representations of old age have had more attention but most studies include representations of adults as young as 50. This means that middle age has been “scooped up” and packaged with old age as if they are similar periods of life. We contend that middle age is very different from old age for most people in Western societies. Unless redundancy and unemployment intervene, middle aged people have more financial independence than those who have left the workforce on the grounds of age. Comedic representations of middle age as revealed in the data set of films as a time of restlessness, dissatisfaction and crisis appear to be out of step with 21st century lifestyles and expectations. For example, as the age for women having their first child increases in the developed world there will be increasing numbers of parents who will almost certainly not think of themselves as jaded and worn-out and on the slippery slope to old age. In Australia 14.5% of first time mothers are over 35 years old when they birth their baby (Institute of Family Studies, 2013). Experiencing a mid-life crisis and indulgence in stereotypical behaviours such as buying a Porsche seem unlikely for a 45 year old or older who is bound up in school runs, balancing work and home duties and all the other constraints on their time and finances.

The small number of films in the data set is a limitation and including more films about middle age would have provided more examples of how middle age is represented in comedy film. However given that the myths of middle age are very well defined in terms of stereotypical emotions and behaviours, increasing the number in the data set would have increased the number of examples of stereotypical representations not necessarily provided any significant revelations. The researchers viewed many more films than were included in the study and concluded that the quality of the information gathered was not enhanced by increasing the quantity of examples analysed. In addition most critical discourse analysis studies examine a relatively small number of texts that the researchers consider to be representative (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 25).

The results of our analysis show that middle age in comedy film is shown to have many negative aspects including failed hopes and expectations. It is the notion of a crisis due to resistance to or fear of ageing which sparks the events that comprise the plot of such films. It is our observation that comedy films about an uneventful middle age are difficult to locate because where would the humour lie? We consider therefore that it is likely that our findings about middle age in comedy films are relevant to most films in this sub-genre.

Negative stereotyping in the media around the ageing process from middle age through to old age informs ageist attitudes and behaviours. When health care professionals hold such views it is pejorative to the well-being of older people in their care. We suggest that there is much to be gained by using the vast resources of entertainment media to compare and contrast the realities of each of life’s stages with the corresponding screen representations. The introduction of critical discourse analysis in the curricula of nursing programs, for instance, would equip students to discern and question inaccurate stereotyping of life stages and develop an appreciation of each individual’s experience, capacity, expectations and needs.

The defining purpose of a comedy film is to make us laugh, and exaggeration of issues relating to ageing and fear of ageing, including the liberal use of stereotyping, are key features. Unfortunately, research has shown these negative representations of ageing result in ageism so the last laugh will, indeed, be on our future selves (Nelson, 2011).

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Article Citation

Gatling, M., Mills, J., & Lindsay, D. (2014). Representations of middle age in comedy film: A critical discourse analysis. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(23), 1-15. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/gatling23.pdf>
