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Representations of Age and Ageing in Comedy Film

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**For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Nursing, Midwifery & Nutrition**

James Cook University

October, 2013

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STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION OF OTHERS

Nature of Assistance	Contribution	Co-contributors
Editing and proofreading	Spelling, punctuation, grammar and style checked. Author responded to editor's suggestions by making or rejecting suggested changes.	Marnie Hitchins

DEDICATION

For Dominic, my husband and best friend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis has been like a six-year pregnancy – long and uncomfortable towards the end but I have had many supporters to help me through the labour and I have many people to thank. My principal advisor, Associate Professor Jane Mills, has guided me through the past 18 months with her keen intelligence, boundless enthusiasm, strong sense of direction and good humour. My second advisor, Associate Professor David Lindsay, has been very generous in sharing his extensive knowledge of critical discourse analysis. Thank you to Professor Colin Holmes who was my principal advisor prior to his retirement. I am very grateful to Marnie Hitchins for her excellent editing and proofing skills. You were never quite able to teach me when to use ‘which’ and when to use ‘that’ but you tried your best with what you had to work with. Every year at JCU Graduate Research School, I was spurred on by the encouragement of the staff and fellow students. I am very thankful for your support and friendship.

To all members of my wonderful family - thank you for nurturing my dream. I love you all very much: Annie and John Hugh, Aoife and Liam; Thommy, Katy and Roisin; Joe and Georgina, Brendan and Helen; Abigail; Patrick; Kitty; and James. And that goes for Caitlin, Michael and Lauren too! A huge thank you to Dom for your patience and support - your questioning and challenging of my ideas helped me to find my way through the maze. I really appreciate that you watched so much comedy with me even though it made your eyes glaze over at times.

To my mother Maureen Egan, in Ireland: thank you for believing I could complete this project and urging me on. I wish my father was still here to share this with me. We would have raised a glass or two of Jamesons together.

‘Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind.’ (E.B. White). No frogs were harmed in this research.

ABSTRACT

Ageism is a social injustice that impacts negatively every person who lives long enough. The aim of this thesis is to raise critical awareness of ageist messages in the representations of older people on-screen in the popular genre of comedy film.

It has been generally acknowledged that society is influenced, often unknowingly, by the mass media. Film, particularly comedy film, is a popular entertainment medium that is readily-accessible, both in cinemas and in DVD/Blu ray format. Going to the cinema, downloading a film or renting a DVD from a store are relatively cheap entertainment options for many people in the developed world. Film, therefore, has the potential to influence large numbers of viewers. Many films carry ageist messages, which are often undetected and unrecognised by audiences, yet these messages influence attitudes, behaviours and opinions. Negative representations of ageing occur in films made for children as well as those made for adults, which is even more unacceptable because children are particularly susceptible to influence, and can develop inaccurate views about age and ageing that may persist throughout their lives.

As a registered nurse I have an obligation to adhere to professional standards requiring me, and every nurse, to respect and promote the human rights of all members of society. Discrimination against clients on any grounds, including age, is unacceptable and contrary to the codes of practice and ethical standards that govern and guide the profession. Unfortunately, it has been shown that health professionals, including nurses, are not immune to developing ageist views. This can negatively affect the care given to older clients and can contribute to poor physical and mental health outcomes.

A dispositive analysis approach to critical discourse analysis was used to investigate the ways age and ageing are represented in a selection of comedy films. Dispositive analysis includes analysis of actions and objects related to the topic under scrutiny as well as analysis of the language used. This approach is extremely useful when examining representations of age and ageing in film because not all aspects of the discourse are linguistic. An example of this is the following scenario: a car is seen weaving erratically along the road with just the top of the driver's old-fashioned hat visible through the front windscreen. It is commonly assumed that the driver is an elderly woman; no linguistic signposting is required.

Comedy, as a genre, was chosen because of its capacity to perpetuate ideas and representations that, in other contexts, would be unacceptable but, using the guise of humour, are rendered permissible. Highly-exaggerated and ridiculous situations and characterisations are

expected in comedy films; harmful messages, therefore, about gender, race, sexual orientation, religion and age can be disseminated freely. Were such scenes and messages to be aired in the real world, repercussions might well occur in the form of public protest and legal action.

This thesis considers a selected corpus of films in three categories:

1. films about mid-life and the concept of mid-life crisis
2. films concerning older people's age and ageing
3. films related to older people's sexuality.

Films that featured aspects of middle age as well as old age were considered because middle age is identified as the time in the life span when ageing becomes a subject that attracts the attention of the comedy filmmakers. The films in the dataset were chosen on the basis of their audience reach and popularity and content, which had to contain material related to themes of age and ageing.

Findings confirmed that middle age is largely represented as a time of crisis, particularly for men. Analysis showed middle age to be characterised by stereotypical behaviours related to disappointment and dissatisfaction, including infidelity, restlessness, yearning for change, risk taking and attempts to 'turn back the clock' by cosmetic enhancements.

Representations of old age in recent comedy films were found to be much more diverse than those found in earlier manifestations. Tentative steps appear to have been taken towards a more realistic portrayal of old age, particularly in relation to sexuality. Representations of old age as a period of asexuality appear to be fading to be replaced with a discourse of ageing which includes older people who have some level of sexual activity or, at least, an interest in sexuality. The myth of a heteronormative old age is being challenged by the emergence of older characters that are openly gay.

The thesis concludes with a discussion about strategies that could be used to raise critical awareness about the messages disseminated in film. Specific strategies for use in the education of health professionals could reduce ageism in the future workforce of this vital sector of the community. Critical thinking skills could be sharpened by giving students the opportunity to evaluate representations of older people in film. Students could reflect on their own attitudes to ageing and consider how their practice could be improved by embracing an open-minded, non-judgemental approach to the care of all clients, irrespective of age.

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All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

(As You Like It, Act II, Scene VII, Shakespeare, 1623)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare describes the seven ages of man from the newly-born, mewling, puking infant through to the blind, toothless oblivion immediately preceding death (*As You Like It* Act II, scene VII). Shakespeare reaches out from the 1600s to demonstrate that stereotyping of the ageing process is not confined to recent times. His description of the last stage of life is confronting, when a man is defined only by his lack of functions – sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything- rather than any positive attributes. It correlates with a negative stereotype of ageing in today's media, an image dubbed by researchers as 'severely impaired' ([Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994](#); [Magoffin, 2007](#); [Schmidt & Boland, 1986](#)), which describes older people as senile, slow moving and thinking, sexless, sick and feeble.

Shakespeare's gloomy vision of old age in the 1600s is just one contribution to a canon of creative works that portray old age as either painful, confused and helpless, or laughable, ridiculous and worthy only of mockery. Shakespeare's plays were for the entertainment of 'everyman' and his audiences at the Globe Theatre would have comprised people from every walk of life ([Harbage, 1941](#); [M. Lee, 2006](#)). His plays would have influenced the opinions of audience members in a period when the means of disseminating opinions was limited and 'the playhouse took on the role of shaping and moving people's minds' ([Mulryne & Shewring, 1997, p.16](#)). In this thesis I look at the modern day equivalent of entertainment for 'everyman' – film. While the plays of Shakespeare, and regrettably, even the medium of theatre itself, have been labelled as elitist and out of the reach of many, going to the cinema remains affordable for most people, with a range of film genres appealing to a broad spectrum of tastes. Like Shakespeare's offerings, the content in films also shapes and moves people's minds. It is the moving and shaping of minds in relation to age and ageing, from middle age onwards, that is the central focus of this research study, because modern audiences, like Shakespeare's, are also influenced by what they see and hear. Content that pillories characters because of their age risks dangerous possibilities of inciting prejudice and discrimination against older people which has consequences socially, in the workplace and for health and wellbeing.

The aim of this research study is to identify how age and ageing are portrayed in comedy film. Nine films met the study's inclusion criteria and a methodological approach of critical discourse analysis, based on dispositive analysis, was applied to these films. As a starting point, a literature review of the research on representations of ageing in the visual media was undertaken with a focus on film, television and television advertising. I searched the literature for the answer to a very broad question, namely, 'how are older people represented in

popular visual media?’ The literature review revealed both the existence of negative stereotyping and evidence of the effects that stereotyping can have on attitudes and behaviours towards older people. There was a noticeable gap in the literature in relation to the way the genre of comedy film represents ageing, therefore I decided to focus my study on that area. Based on my preliminary analysis of the data, I added two further questions to my initial question so that, when undertaking the analysis of the films selected for my data sample, I asked three questions:

1. How are age and ageing represented in comedy film?
2. How are issues relating to middle age represented in comedy film?
3. How is the sexuality of older adults represented in comedy film?

Ageism and possible reasons why ageing and reaching a certain age engender discriminatory behaviour are discussed in this chapter, including the consequences of ageing both for the health and wellbeing of those discriminated against. These consequences include how an older generation, many of whom are disaffected, disenfranchised and undervalued as a result of ageist attitudes, can lose confidence in their ability to live independently and contribute to their community, thus seemingly validating the negative stereotypes used about them. Thus a cycle of cause and effect perpetuates ageist behaviours and results in ‘mal-being’ (as opposed to well-being) of its victims.

In this opening chapter I also set out my reasons, as a registered nurse, for undertaking this study and I discuss why critical discourse analysis (CDA) was the theoretical framework within which this study was undertaken. CDA provides an appropriate framework with which to expose the way age and ageing are represented through talk, actions and objects in the selected films and also in text and graphics used in metadata such as reviews, blogs and posters. CDA seeks to address social ills by analysing the discourse around the topic and exposing examples of power imbalances, cultural hegemony and attempts at social control by people, groups and organisations with vested interests ([van Dijk, 2001a](#)). Furthermore, and of particular interest to me, is the way CDA, as a methodology, encourages analysts to propose ways of addressing ways of combating the social ills promulgated by a particular text. A paper I presented at the *2013 Emerging Researchers in Ageing* conference, and published in the conference’s peer-reviewed proceedings, is included at the end of the chapter. The paper is an introduction to the way representations of age and ageing can be examined using CDA. In the film chosen as an exemplar, *Old Dogs* ([W. Becker, 2009a](#)), two middle-aged men are frequently represented as having health deficits usually found in much older men. The paper describes how the film, which is from the Disney studios and is classified as family entertainment, sends confused and mixed messages about the ageing process.

Ageism – what it is, why it happens, what the effects are and why we must prevent it

In 1965, gerontologist Robert Butler offered the world a name to describe discrimination against people on the grounds of age. Butler called this form of prejudice ‘ageism’ ([1969](#)) and ignited debate around this particular form of bigotry, which still continues today. By 2002, Butler had refined his initial discussions on the nature of ageism sufficiently to outline a Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons ([2002](#)). In the declaration he draws attention to the United Nations’ failure to outline the human rights of older people, particularly in the face of elder exploitation in the form of ‘physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse occurring in their homes as well as in institutions such as nursing homes’ ([p.152](#)). What is particularly significant for my thesis about Butler’s assertions is that he points the finger at abuse that occurs in a way that is remote from its victims but has immense power to influence how they are thought about and how they feel about themselves. He cites the ‘cruel and inaccurate ways’ that older people are treated in ‘language, images and actions’ as part of a culture of abuse ([p.152](#)).

In this thesis, I examine the language, images and actions used to describe and portray age and ageing in the genre of comedy film. The discourse of ageing, as portrayed in popular entertainment, feeds audience opinions about what ageing is like and, through screen representations, stereotypes of ageing are perpetuated ([Cohen-Shalev & Marcus, 2007](#); [Fisher, 1992](#)). Where these stereotypes are negative and inaccurate, the ageing process becomes a thing to be feared and older people are disregarded, disrespected and discriminated against. A desire for social justice could incite a stand against ageism, yet, as old age is inevitable for every person on the planet unless an untimely death intervenes, self-interest should motivate us all to follow Butler’s call to action when he says, ‘We must not simply bear witness. We must compel change’ ([p.152](#)).

Denial of death, resentment of the elderly and fear of ageing

There is a school of thought that a main reason for stereotyping, ridiculing and being generally negative about older people is that, in doing so, a distance is maintained between oneself and old age, because what inevitably follows old age is death. This fear of death and the consequent distancing from older people has been labelled Terror Management Theory ([Solomon & Greenberg, 2004](#)). [Nelson \(2011\)](#) sums up the theory thus: ‘By blaming the older person, stereotyping him/her, and treating elders with pity, anger, irritation, or patronizing speech, younger people are able to trick themselves into believing that they will not eventually

die' (p.40). Ernest Becker's work, *The Denial of Death* (1973), explores the fear that all humans have of dying and describes the way they are aware of their own mortality from childhood and seek to avoid contemplating it. In his seminal work on ageism, Butler (1969) also notes that, at the root of ageism, lies 'a fear of powerlessness, uselessness and death' (p.243).

Alarmism is rife about the cost of ageing to modern society. Economists have noted the burgeoning number of people entering retirement and predict a shortfall in available cash in pension funds to support them all. The United States National Intelligence Council report into global trends entitled *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World* (NIC, 2008) includes a section on the 'Pensioner Boom: Challenges of Aging Populations'. The report highlights difficulties presented by ageing populations through the use of emotive language:

The aging of societies will have economic consequences. Even with productivity increases, slower employment growth from a shrinking work force probably will reduce Europe's already tepid GDP growth by 1 percent. By the 2030s, Japan's GDP growth is projected to drop to near zero according to some models. The cost of trying to maintain pensions and health coverage will squeeze out expenditures on other priorities, such as defence (p.21).

The image of defence (with its implications of safety and security) being sacrificed, as ageing people squeeze money out of the Government purse, could well cause resentment of the ageing population by younger taxpayers who are reminded of the future burden they will carry.

Denial of ageing and how it benefits the cosmetic industry

With increasing age, there are changes to the physical appearance of the human face and body; in western cultures, however, the appearance of young faces and bodies is often prized over older versions. Being youthful-looking is linked to many opportunities from finding a romantic partner to finding and/or keeping a job. For women, the imperative to maintain a youthful appearance has greater urgency as it is widely reported by women that as they age they become 'invisible'. As Clarke and Griffin note in their research into aspects of gendered ageism 'social invisibility arises from the acquisition of visible signs of ageing and compels women to make their chronological ages imperceptible through the use of beauty work' (2008, p.653). For both men and women, having a youthful appearance appears to be a criterion on prospective employers' agendas. In a Canadian study, men reported that grey hair or baldness was a definite disadvantage because, even if they had managed to disguise their age on a curriculum vitae, there was no possibility of concealment unless hair dye or a toupee was brought into play at the interview stage (Berger, 2009). These natural manifestations of ageing have fed the growth of the cosmetic industry (Bayer, 2005; Calasanti, 2005) as the desire not to be seen as 'old' spurs

ageing consumers into buying treatments which they hope will halt or slow down the ageing process.

The media, always eager to feed audience hunger for information and advice, has tapped into western society's obsession with youthfulness and the fear of ageing. Several television series follow the fortunes of participants who submit to extensive surgical procedures and intensive diet and exercise routines in the quest to look younger and more attractive. One such show, *Extreme Makeover*, uses the word 'extreme' without any acknowledgement of the semantic load of the adjective. The ethical issues surrounding the use of people with image issues who are publically nipped and tucked for the entertainment of others remain the subject of discussion ([Heyes & Jones, 2009](#)). The extent of the surgery that some participants submit to is indeed 'extreme' – a descriptor which places the 'makeover' at the far end of a spectrum of makeovers, if such a spectrum exists.

One show that combines viewers' idolisation of the medical profession with a fear of the ageing process is *The Doctors*. This American show features four medically-qualified doctors - three male and one female - who showcase their expertise in cosmetic surgery, emergency medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology, and paediatrics. The show opens with the four hosts striding authoritatively into the studio to the enthusiastic applause of their studio audience. One of them is wearing blue scrubs as if he may, at any moment, need to rush off to attend to a medical crisis while another wears a white lab coat opened to reveal a fashionable outfit. Themes explored by these celebrity medics often return to ageing: how to appear younger, how to avoid having your true age be apparent to others and how to prevent or slow down the ageing process. In one episode (shown in Australia May 12, 2012, Channel 9), the theme of the show was '20 ways to look 10 years younger'. The hosts employed the wisdom of the 'Anti-Aging Squad' to demonstrate the chosen tips. The language used had military overtones and made the ageing process seem like an enemy from which society needed protection.

Embedded in the language, themes and visuals of *The Doctors* is an ideology of commercial and business interests. At the beginning of the episode under discussion, one of the doctors asked the audience, 'who wouldn't want to look 10 years younger?'. This was a rhetorical question and overtly implied that not wanting to look 10 years younger was a concept that was unheard of, even ridiculous. Thus the audience is drawn into the notion that wanting to look younger is a commonly-held desire and failing to hold such a view would be unusual. This is one of the ways cultural hegemony works. The vested interests of the beauty industry and the cosmetic surgery industry send powerful messages about the desirability and advantages of resisting the appearance of ageing. Wrinkles, sagging breasts, baldness, 'lunch lady arms' and grey hair are words and concepts used in the discourse of ageing. The characteristics of ageing

bodies are nearly always used in negative ways. When older people are represented in the media, especially in comedy film, these markers of ageing are often highlighted to identify characters as belonging to an older age group. The effect of the beauty industry's push to entice consumers to buy products and treatments to prolong a youthful appearance is to make those who choose not to partake appear to be older than their 'enhanced' counterparts and therefore, at a greater risk of discrimination. As is often the case, those people without the financial means to purchase products and treatments continue to find themselves marginalised, thus the ageing poor not only lag behind the wealthy in access to health care and housing, but cannot disguise their ageing should they wish to.

Economic consequences of ageism

Despite what amounts to resentment of older generations for the burden they place on the public coffers, ageism, ironically, makes the situation worse because it saps self-confidence, negatively affects health and ultimately can lead to a dependence on the state for care and support. In a world where life expectancy is increasing, even in developing countries, out-dated notions and assumptions about age and ageing must be challenged. This is imperative because economic factors relating to an ageing population, together with indications that the birth rate is declining, have resulted in an increase in the proportion of people over the age of 65 in western societies. The global financial crisis has affected the financial expectations of many would-be retirees who now find that superannuation payouts are much lower than anticipated. As a result they have to remain in the workforce for longer than they had hoped. Postponing retirement beyond the traditional age of 65, however, has proved to be problematic for many members of the 'baby boomer' generation.

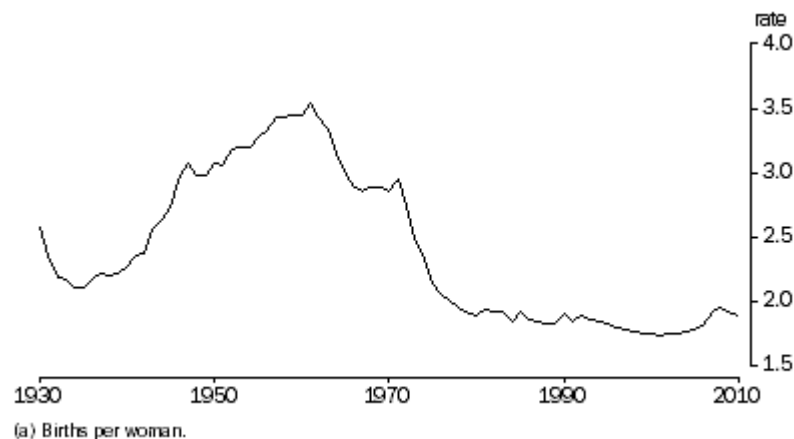
When the payment of an aged pension was conceived by German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck in the 1880s, 70 was a venerable age ([Liedtke, 2006](#)). A man could expect to live for 42 years and woman's life expectancy was 50 years. Offering a pension to 70-year-olds, and subsequently to 65-year-olds, was not a burden that the state considered to be onerous. However, 120 years later, advances in health care have made the age of 65 years attainable for the majority of people who live in the developed countries of the world. Treatment of chronic conditions has improved, as have advances in the treatment of once fatal conditions such as heart disease, renal failure and some cancers. In Australia, the projected life expectancy for a child born in the first decade of the 21st century is 83 years for a female and 79 years for a male ([Australian Government Actuary, 2009](#)).

It has become accepted that people withdraw from full time paid employment at about age 65 in order to allow 'young blood' to replace them in the workforce and for older people to enjoy a number of years at the end of their lives when they can relax and rest. However, with

the dramatic increase in life expectancy in the last century, the number of years that an average retiree can expect to live after exiting the workforce has increased accordingly. For example, a male aged 65 in 1965 could expect to live for an average of 12.2 more years; a woman for around another 15.7 years. By 2009, a male aged 65 was more likely to live for a further 18.7 years and a woman for another 21.8 years ([Australian Government Actuary, 2009](#)).

Figure 1: Total fertility rate Australia – 1930 to 2010

Australian Bureau of Statistics (["Births Australia," 2010](#))



The above graph illustrates how the post-war boom in the birth rate, which gave us the ‘baby boomer’ generation, fell rapidly throughout the 1960s and the following decades. As a result, the taxes of fewer younger people will reportedly have to support an increasing number of older people who have retired from the workforce or are preparing to do so.

In response to this situation there is gathering momentum by government departments to promote a wellness model for older people and encourage ‘baby boomers’ to defer retirement. Bernard Salt is a commentator and advisor to government and business sectors on cultural and demographic trends. Commenting in his popular blog on the Australian Government’s 2009 decision to increase the pensionable age from 65 years to 67 years by 2023, [Salt \(2009\)](#) said ‘more people in the workforce for longer is good news for governments. Not only is there the bonus of a delayed draw on the Age Pension but there’s also more tax paid’ ([p. not available](#)). In the US, similar sentiments are being expressed. With increasing longevity and fewer taxpayers to support the expanding numbers of over 65s, it is not viable for a government-funded retirement to last a quarter of a century. Professor Olivia Miller of Wharton Business School, University of Pennsylvania, in an interview with Julia Lorkin of the Australian School of Business, mooted that 75 years of age should be encouraged as a

retirement goal for those sound in mind and body. Miller suggested that the concept of retirement may need to be redefined so that sexagenarians stop thinking about ‘sitting on the front porch on a rocking chair or playing golf, but remaining engaged for as long as possible’ ([Lorkin, 2011](#)).

Unfortunately, ageism and ageist attitudes by employers impede progress towards a longer working life. As discussed above, issues such as maturity in physical appearance impinge on employment opportunities for older people and affect those in their middle age as well ([Gullette, 1998](#)). It seems that from mid-life onwards people are caught between two opposing imperatives – one which says they should carry on working for as long as possible and another which says that, as they age, they become increasingly incompetent, lag behind in learning new technologies and are a liability rather than an asset in the workforce.

Ageism in the workplace: ‘You can’t teach an old dog new tricks’

[M. Thornton and Luker \(2010\)](#) found that ageism in a work context has had limited scrutiny and that a culture of ‘youthism’ has permeated the workplace. A shift from work practices which involved large scale production of goods and commodities to stoke the fires of capitalism has been replaced by an era where there is ever-increasing use of information and communication technology (ICT) with a resulting downsizing of the workforce. Older workers can be trained successfully to use new technologies and acquire new skills but perceptions persist that they cannot ([Behaghel, Caroli, & Roger, 2011](#); [Maitland, 2010](#)). A Finnish study demonstrated that, contrary to assumptions based on erroneous stereotypes, older people, particularly from the baby boomer generation, are not anxious about new technologies such as internet and SMS texting ([Niemelä-Nyrhinen, 2007](#)). On the contrary, they are keen to embrace new technologies and have the ability to do so. It is assumed that new technologies, particularly the starting up of new technology businesses, are the province of the young. This myth is fuelled by the success of young entrepreneurs, such as the founders of Microsoft (Bill Gates, 21 years of age at the time) and Facebook (Mark Zuckerberg, aged 20 at that time), but it is inaccurate. The image of the young, brash innovator steering a company to fame and fortune is not borne out by statistical research and analysis. Twice as many US-born entrepreneurs start their businesses when they are in their 50s than in their 20s ([Wadhwa, Freeman, & Rissing, 2008](#)).

The findings of a large-scale study of 1500 participants aged between 50 and 75 in the UK indicated that older members of the workforce were not tired, jaded or merely ‘hanging on’ for retirement day as portrayed in common myths about ageing ([Maitland, 2010](#)). On the contrary, there was an enthusiasm for being employed and even a desire to progress careers rather than step back from responsibilities and challenges. The results were as follows:

- The majority of workers over 50 (62 per cent of women and 59 per cent of men) want to continue working beyond state pension age.
- More than twice as many (11 per cent) over 50s want promotion as want to downshift (4 per cent).
- Instead of being unfit to work due to ageing and ill health, 62 per cent describe themselves as feeling as fit as ever, with structural and attitudinal barriers thwarting their ability to stay involved.
- Enthusiasm for learning persists: 44 per cent of 56-59 year-olds and a third of 60-64 year-olds have undertaken training in the past three years. 21 per cent of the over 50s had trained to improve their job prospects.
- Responsibility for children continues, with nearly one-quarter of 56 to 59-year-olds and 9 per cent of 70 to 75-year-olds still supporting their children financially.
- Working longer is not a burden borne purely out of necessity: those who have elected to work longer are happy and enjoying what they do.
- There is significant demand for greater flexibility in hours and location of work.
- Sixty-eight per cent of the over 50s unemployed below state pension age and 85 per cent of people inactive and over state pension age said that greater availability of flexible and part-time work would help them to find jobs ([p.5](#)).

The ‘baby boomers’

Members of the generation born between 1946 and 1964 have been dubbed ‘baby boomers’. Baby boomers were born in the years following World War II as life slowly returned to normality after the uncertainty, deprivations and absences forced by the maelstrom of conflict. [I am a baby boomer as are many of my friends.] There is a perception that baby boomers are a unified cohort with similar interests and expectations. This is obviously a simplistic view of a generation that spans 18 years and includes those born into the austerity of the early post war years as well as those born in the ‘swinging’ 60s when prosperity and innovation were features in many western societies. [Spence \(2012\)](#), writing in the British Medical Journal, notes that baby boomers are:

Spawned of large families, they have an inbuilt social support system. Defined by silly, long beards, love-ins, 10-minute long rock tracks, rayon, wholemeal bread, vegetarians, social mobility, communes, radical left wing politics (reserved only for middle class members), and final salary pension schemes. These are the spoilt baby boomers. Born after the war till 1965 they are a large demographic bulge. They bought houses for a few shells and beads, which are now worth millions. Baby boomers hold 80% of the country’s wealth ([p.67](#)).

While acknowledging the humorous intent of Spence's remarks, what he says does resonate with younger generations. Media stories about the greed of baby boomers abound and often refer to a legacy of debt that the generation will leave behind for their children and grandchildren. The baby boomers are the generation that will be remembered for 'the incredible debt burden and constraints it left on its kids', reports the New York Times ([Friedman, 2011, p.5](#)). Meanwhile in the UK, The Guardian tells readers that, 'Baby boomers are at it again, making decision after decision to protect their wealth at the expense of the country's economic wellbeing' ([Inman, 2011](#)). In Australia, a piece in the Sydney Morning Herald labelled baby boomers as, 'the most privileged, most profligate generation in human history' ([Sheehan, 2011](#)). There are, of course, articles in the popular media that dispute the negative labelling of an entire generation comprising of a diverse cohort of rich and poor, urban and rural, employers and 'wage slaves' and the multiple other descriptors which could be applied to millions of people worldwide, who happened to be born between 1946 and 1964. However, when resentment about being a generation on the cusp of retirement and 'old age' is added to the already negative stereotypes about older people generated and perpetuated in the media including film, there is fertile ground for the growth of ageist attitudes and behaviours.

Age discrimination legislation

In Australia, as in much of the developed world, legislation has been introduced to outlaw behaviours and actions which discriminate on the grounds of age. The *Age Discrimination Act 2004* (ADA) is Commonwealth legislation and complements legislative arrangements in the states and territories (some of which pre-date the Commonwealth legislation by as much as 20 years in the case of the Equal Opportunity Acts of South Australia and Western Australia). M. Thornton and Luker's ([2010](#)) statistical analysis of the complaints made under ADA indicate that relatively few discrimination cases have been brought under the Act. The reasons are unclear but Thornton and Lucas are convinced that the few cases that are dealt with under the Act are just the 'tip of the iceberg'.

In 2011, the Australian Human Rights Commission appointed an Age Discrimination Commissioner. Addressing a gerontology conference in November 2012, the Commissioner noted evidence showing that exposure to negative stereotyping in the media is a source for the development of prejudicial and discriminatory attitudes towards older people and pledged to commission a report on aged stereotypes in the media ([Ryan, 2012](#)). The report, entitled *Fact or fiction? Stereotypes of older Australians* ([Australian Human Rights Commission, 2013](#)), confirmed that media representations of older people remain predominantly negative despite decades of research which highlights the nexus between negative stereotyping and ageist attitudes and behaviours. The Commissioner has thrown down the gauntlet and invited all

parties responsible for the perpetuation of damaging representations of age and ageing to collaborate to make changes that will eventually benefit all Australians.

Representations of age and ageing in film

The literature review in chapter 2, which underpins this thesis, examines the research on the way age and ageing are represented in popular media such as film, television and visual advertising. Findings from this review show that representations of ageing are, for the most part, negative and unrealistic. Older characters appear on screen far less often than younger characters, with older women faring worse than men by fading from the screen almost entirely. This invisibility mirrors the situation for female film actors who find that there is a paucity of strong roles for women over 50, thus older female actors often find that their careers fizzle out at a much earlier age than their male counterparts ([Chivers, 2011](#); [Horwitz, 2006](#)). Many female actors resort to cosmetic surgery or treatments in order to prolong their working lives ([Rasche, 2006](#)).

[Chivers \(2011\)](#) notes film produces what is accepted to be ‘cultural knowledge’, and this has a strong influence on how the later years of life are considered. I have chosen to analyse the film genre of comedy because it is the most popular genre of film, accounting for nearly 30% of the box office revenue realised between 1995 and 2013 ([Nash Information Services, 2012](#)). Features of comedy films often include exaggerated characterisations, unrealistic situations and a disregard for normal parameters of acceptable social behaviour. An example of this is the successful comedy *Bridesmaids* ([Feig, 2011](#)) where, in one scene that takes place in the genteel surroundings of a bridal wear salon, the characters begin to feel the effects of food poisoning. In this scene, one woman has diarrhoea, defecating in the wash basin with accompanying belching and farting. This scene pushes the boundaries of what women have previously done on screen and typifies how comedy often seeks to shock and surprise.

In comedy films that include older characters, a frequently-used ploy is to exaggerate issues that can affect older people. Therefore older characters are often portrayed as being hard of hearing, incontinent of urine or confused and this is used for comic effect. The sexuality of older people is considered most amusing, possibly because of the perceived incongruity of older people engaging in sexual activity at all. Thus when Barbara Streisand’s character, Roz Focker, in *Meet the Fockers* ([Roach, 2004](#)), a sex therapist who teaches ‘sexercise’ classes to older couples, it is portrayed as a humorous plot point. The language in the scene ensures that the link between infirmity and old age is made explicit for audiences:

‘This position is terrific for anyone with osteoporosis, gout or goiter. Stay with me, kids. We’re almost done ... all right, guys. We have to wrap it up. Everyone!’

Remember to take your Liberator pads. And don't forget to stretch before you try this at home. We don't want anyone shattering a pelvis.'

Chapter 6 of this thesis explores the representations of 'senior sexuality' further and a number of comedy films are analysed, some of which include homosexuality of older adults as well as heterosexual characters.

The nursing profession and its stance on prejudice and discrimination

I am writing this thesis as a member of a profession that has a long and proud history of providing care and compassion to the sick, promoting health in communities and championing social justice. Since New Zealand passed the *Nurses Registration Act* in 1901 and became the first country to register trained nurses, the profession has constantly strived to introduce rigorous standards and guidelines. Thus the public can be assured that a registered nurse adheres to competency standards and a code of ethics both of which safeguard the community from harm arising from nursing practice. In Australia, the documents which set out those principles are the *National competency standards for the registered nurse* ([NMBA, 2006](#)) and the *Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia* ([NMBA, 2008](#)). While both documents reflect emphatically the requirement for nurses to respect the rights of all individuals and not discriminate against anyone in the provision of health care, it is the language in the code of ethics which sets out most forcefully the obligation for nurses not to discriminate against older people themselves, but also to actively *work* to prevent it. Value Statement 3.3, 'Nurses value the diversity of people' states that:

Nurses work to reduce the adverse effects power imbalances and prejudicial attitudes and practices have on social and institutional justice, and on the just and humane provision and delivery of nursing and health care. In particular, they work to ensure people are not disadvantaged or harmed because of their appearance, language, culture, religion, age, sexuality, national or social origin, economic or political status, physical or mental disability, health status, or any other characteristics that may be used by others to reduce the equal enjoyment or exercise of the others to reduce the equal enjoyment or exercise the right to health ([NMBA, 2008](#)).

Unfortunately, as the literature review in chapter 2 shows, some nurses, along with other health professionals, do exhibit discriminatory behaviour towards older clients. While open hostility has not been noted in the literature I have researched, other covert forms of discrimination exist. Sometimes nurses use patronising and disrespectful language when addressing older clients and use 'elderspeak' or the use of intimate terms like 'sweetie' or

‘honey’ ([Draper, 2005](#)). According to , elderspeak is the equivalent of ‘baby talk’ and is often employed by staff in aged care facilities ([Kemper, 1994, p.17](#)). Features of elderspeak include short sentences with fewer long words of three or more syllables ([Kemper, 1994, p.17](#)). Use of this inappropriate communication style ‘results from and reinforces (negative) stereotypes that older adults are cognitively impaired’ ([Kemper, 1994, p.18](#))

As part of my work in the accreditation of nursing education programs, I interview students to gauge their views on the programs they are undertaking. A fairly frequent theme that comes up in the course of these conversations is that students do not see the value in professional placement in an aged care setting. Some students feel they got the ‘short straw’ if they are placed in aged care as their first placement, especially if fellow students are allocated an acute care setting. This anecdotal evidence is backed by research. Speaking at the 9th Asia Oceania Gerontology and Geriatrics Congress in Melbourne in 2011, academics John Stevens and Andrew Robinson reported that students’ attitude to aged care remains negative ([Curtis, 2011](#)). It is apparent that serious effort must be put into developing strategies to change nurses’ attitudes to providing care for the elderly. One way of doing this is to encourage nursing students and students from other health professions to embrace an understanding of the life cycle as a gradual transition from birth to old age, where each stage is valued and celebrated. In western cultures the discourse of age and ageing tends to be overshadowed by negativity. From middle age onwards the often-exaggerated downside of ageing is transmitted via diverse media from cruelly-humorous birthday cards to negative representations in film and television.

As a registered nurse, I am obliged to work to reduce prejudicial attitudes and practices and I have elected to undertake that work by examining the sources that feed prejudice by representing age and ageing in negative and stereotypical ways. In this study, I have used CDA, specifically Dispositive Analysis, to look at the words, actions and objects that are used to represent age and ageing from middle age through to old age. In dispositive analysis ‘things’ associated with ageing such as rocking chairs or walking sticks, which might not be referred to in language, yet have been inserted into the scene because they are emblematic, can become part of the discourse because they are part of how we think about ageing. Similarly, actions that are considered to be stereotypical of older people such as driving erratically or becoming lost in a car park often feature in comedy films. Therefore, in comedy films when objects/things, action and language are combined to give a picture of what it is like to be middle aged or older, that becomes the discourse of age and ageing. A comprehensive description of this approach is found in chapter 3.

The usefulness of this study will be to demonstrate to readers how critical analysis of aspects of popular culture can raise awareness of how opinions and prejudices, both societal and personal, are formed. A crucial aspect of that awareness is *self*-awareness and the development

of a questioning stance leading to reflective practice. It is accepted that reflection is at the core of competent practice for a nurse who delivers culturally-safe and appropriate care ([Freshwater, 2002](#)). *The National competency standards for the registered nurse* ([NMBA, 2006](#)) state that 'Reflecting on practice, feelings and beliefs and the consequences of these for individuals/groups is an important professional benchmark' ([p.2](#)). Therefore, reflecting on how exposure to media representations of age gives rise to feelings and beliefs about ageing and older people will be an important step towards dispelling discriminatory attitudes and behaviours for those working in or hoping to work in health care.

Paper presented at Emerging Researchers in Ageing (ERA) Conference 2012

The following paper was presented at the ERA conference in Brisbane in 2012 and illustrates how the representations of middle age in a comedy film can be unpacked to reveal a view of middle age which is often inaccurate in terms of health and happiness. Selection for presenting a paper at the conference was based on a submitted abstract. Papers accepted for presentation were peer reviewed for inclusion in the conference proceedings.

Beginning of manuscript

Representations of age and ageing in comedy films

Abstract

With the twin considerations of an age expectancy of around 85 years and the arrival of the baby boomer generation at the threshold of 'old age,' ageist attitudes and their consequences have the potential to negatively affect the lives of a growing numbers of people. In the developed world the on-going Global Financial Crisis has affected the pension funds, property values and other retirement nest-eggs of a generation who in more prosperous times could have retired from paid employment at the traditional age of 65. However employers are often reluctant to retain or hire older workers despite their skills and experience. Perceptions that they are sick more often are slower, or unable to learn new skills reflect commonly held beliefs about ageing. Negative attitudes about ageing and older people can result in behaviours which are hurtful, discriminatory and deleterious to the health and well-being of the elderly. It has been demonstrated that exposure to negative depictions of age and ageing in the media, particularly on screen, has a pejorative effect on viewers attitudes to older people. This paper examines a number of popular comedy films to consider how age and ageing are depicted in a genre which attracts a diverse audience because of its ability to comfort, relax and cocoon viewers, at least temporarily, from the everyday anxieties of their lives. The methodology used

is Critical Discourse Analysis. By examining the semiotics of the images and language used by and about older characters evidence of cultural hegemony is revealed whereby the interests of the young and beautiful are privileged over the old. Possible uses of closer examination of film and other media offerings include educating students in the health professions to be more discerning in their viewing habits and question their own attitudes to age, ageing and older clients.

Rationale

Ageism as a word to fit a concept was coined by Dr Robert Butler in 1969 and describes prejudice based on age mainly affecting older people rather than youth. Such prejudice is in itself an abuse and lies at the root of physical, sexual, emotional and financial exploitation of older people. Butler in a Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons states that older members of society are 'often treated in cruel and inaccurate ways in language, images and actions' ([2002, p.152](#)). It is the images, specifically the cinematic representations, of older people that are the focus of interest in this paper.

Research over a number of decades has shown that there is a nexus between what is viewed in film and television and the development of opinions and beliefs by viewers ([Anderson et al., 2003](#); [Gerbner & Gross, 1976](#)). Much of the study into the influence of film and television on attitudes and behaviours has been related to depictions of violence. Gerbner's work led to the development of Cultivation Theory, which contends that the more frequently something is depicted on television the more likely that viewers will come to believe it is true. The work of [Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, and Morgan \(1980\)](#) also examined television representations of age and ageing. Their research came to the conclusion that viewers who watch television frequently believe that the elderly are unhealthy and poor without even a sex-life to cheer their existence. Furthermore television represents this state of affairs as commencing earlier for women than men and in television world, as opposed to the real world, men live longer than women.

Inaccurate and misleading representations of ageing have a pejorative effect on the quality of life of older people. Stereotyping characteristics of older people has been shown to have an effect on health, self-confidence and employment opportunities. For example, one study demonstrated that when older people were told that they are likely to have poorer recall of facts and events than younger people there was a measurable decline in memory ([Hess, Auman, Colcombe, & Rahhal, 2003](#)). Employers appear to be particularly susceptible to being influenced by myths about ageing. Fears that older workers are more prone to taking sick leave and are slow to learn new skills has reduced the employability of the 'over 45s' despite government campaigns to encourage baby boomers to delay retirement or even return to the

workforce. Many older people have no option of retirement in the face of seriously depleted superannuation payouts in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis. Yet when redundancy and retrenchment is mooted in a company, it is the older workers who feel most at risk.

Exposure to ageist stereotyping in the media may be the genesis of the ageist attitudes and behaviours so endemic in western thinking. In particular, comedy film is a bastion of stereotypes of all kinds and while acknowledging that humour offers relief against suffering and oppression it also encompasses *Schadenfreude* – laughing at the misfortunes of others. In the case of stereotyping of older people the misfortune appears to be that they are ageing and consequently saddled with apparently hilarious characteristics such as dribbling incontinence; loss of hearing, teeth, hair and sexual function; a tendency to speak in a high pitched querulous voice; a dependency on mobility aids of all kinds, a distrust of technology particularly mobile phones and a general air of irascibility, eccentricity and confusion. Because comedy as a genre is a vehicle for satire, parody, hyperbole, the ludicrous and the outrageous, almost ‘anything goes’ because what it portrays is generally accepted to be not real, not serious and ‘only a joke’. It is under the guise of humour that stereotypes gain acceptance and therefore it is comedy films that have been selected as the focus of a study into the representation of age and ageing.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the methodology chosen to critique comedy films. Using CDA it is possible to expose messages about age that are inaccurate, unappealing and can lead to the development of ageist views and a fear of ageing. CDA as a methodology does not distance itself from the object under scrutiny. On the contrary, CDA challenges the text in order to expose an underlying cultural hegemony whereby those in power subtly, or not so subtly, influence readers, listeners or viewers ([Fairclough, 2010](#); [Locke, 2004](#); [Wodak & Meyer, 2009](#)). The purpose of CDA is to confront assumptions which have become widely accepted ‘truths’ with the intention of raising awareness that there may be an alternative view.

In critiquing the discourse of ageing in comedy film, the intention is not to be a ‘kill joy’ preventing viewers from laughing at aspects of ageing. Censorship is not the aim, the intent is to alert and remind viewers that everything on the screen is seen through the director’s lens and even in cinema vérité or a documentary every shot is edited. Audiences might laugh at a scene where an older man erroneously uses an iPad as a chopping board but if they fail to have any appreciation that the man is an actor and the scene is constructed then the stereotype of technophobic seniors is perpetuated. Viewers could ask themselves if they would find the scene as funny if the man was replaced by a black woman in a wheelchair. They might still laugh but it is likely that there would be a strong awareness of the racist, sexist and ablest undertones of the joke.

Comedy films which rely heavily on stereotyping and are pitched at a family market risk enculturing young audiences with inaccurate ideas about particular groups in society. The popular television series *The Simpsons* which has subsequently also been made into a movie appeals to both children and adults. For children there is slapstick comedy, a child anti-hero in the eight year old Bart and the eccentric antics of Grandpa Simpson who lives in a nursing home with similarly stereotypical old people who are wheelchair bound, confused, under-occupied, over-medicated and lonely. For adults the often cruel actions of Homer Simpson towards his elderly father and the appalling conditions in the nursing home are obviously ironic and satirical. The writers may want to draw attention to disrespect and mistreatment of the elderly however for children watching the show without the mediating voice of an adult there is evidence, episode after episode, that old people are foolish, useless and dependent ([Scanlan & Feinberg, 2000](#)).

In the larger study currently being undertaken, comedy films have been selected based on classifications in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). The IMDb comedy film database was searched. If the name of the film or synopsis included reference to aspects of ageing, the film was considered for inclusion. To analyse age and ageing in one film for the purposes of this paper I have chosen three scenes from *Old Dogs* ([W. Becker, 2009a](#)). This Disney movie is, according to the DVD cover (metadata), a 'hilarious family comedy'. The opening aerial shots are of green, lush Central Park and chic Manhattan, signalling that this is not a movie about struggling families in depressed urban battlefields, rather this is a film where the lifestyle of the characters is likely to be aspirational. Children may wish to identify with children in this movie with its upmarket apartments, sunny weather, expensive cars, lavish birthday parties etc. The two main adult characters, played by John Travolta (Charlie) and Robin Williams (Dan) are single, middle aged men in their 50s. They are business partners and their lifestyles indicate that they have enjoyed financial success in their ventures however as a vehicle for humour in this film both men struggle with ageing particularly in relation to health and fitness.

The theme of loss of function begins in the opening scene where the two men are walking with Charlie's arthritic dog, Lucky, through Central Park. At the sight of two young women jogging towards them they attempt to break into a run in an effort to appear fit and attractive themselves. After the women pass, all three males, men and dog, slow to a hobble, there is reference to sore knees and much grimacing. This discourse of physical decline continues throughout the movie with a parallel decline being experienced by Lucky. A montage of photos during the opening credits allows the audience to note that Lucky is a puppy in 1995, therefore as the film is set in present day (then 2009) he would be 14 years old which is a venerable age for a large dog. Lucky has arthritic legs, is incontinent of urine and dies of old

age in the end of the film. Being a family film Charlie and Dan do not meet this fate but they do suffer similar ailments.

The premise of the film is that Dan unexpectedly finds himself to be the father of seven year old twins whom he has to look after with the help of Charlie while the children's mother is away. They are mistaken for the children's grandparents at a restaurant and Dan's protests at this error are undermined by the large damp patch on his crutch which is the result of a spilt water glass. The waitress appears to think that urinary incontinence is common in a man in his 50s and this view is supported by a fellow diner, also a member of the Grandparents Club, who says that a glass of water 'gets his pump going too'. Urinary incontinence is not a normal part of ageing but under the cloak of comedy it becomes one of the descriptors for a stereotype of older people.

The third scene where aspects of ageing are inaccurate and misleading occurs in Charlie's bathroom where Dan and Charlie compare their medications which have been packed into dispensers holding a weeks' worth of pills divided into daily doses. This is usually a method of pill dispensing recommended for those with impaired memories, not successful business men in their 50s. The medications they are taking relate to 'an ageing prostate', sciatica, high cholesterol, high blood pressure and a joint ailment for which Dan needs anti-inflammatories. Pondering this, Dan remarks to Charlie, 'when did we become our fathers?'. He might well ask this because reliance on an array of medications is more likely to be the province of much older men in their 70s and 80s rather than these two middle-aged pretenders to elder status.

To summarise this brief look at three scenes from *Old Dogs*, the representations of ageing in this film relate to middle aged men however they are depicted as having deteriorating health, a lack of fitness and being on a slippery slope towards old age. Given this gloomy scenario it comes as somewhat of a surprise that the film fast-forwards a year and as the closing credits roll we see that Dan is the father of a three month old baby. There is indeed life in this old dog still.

Summary

With life expectancy now reaching mid 80s and a contraction of pension and superannuation funding forcing the retirement age upwards, it is essential that the present baby boomer generation and following generations do not suffer from ageist attitudes which destroy their self-confidence, rob them of their health and impede their chances of employment. It is equally important that the preceding generation who have already retired, who may already be recipients of healthcare and may be living in aged care facilities do not encounter discrimination and humiliation based on their age. Analysis of the messages embedded in the discourses of age

and ageing in entertainment particularly comedy film will expose the inaccurate and unjust representations which feed the stereotypes at the heart of ageism. Incorporating media literacy and awareness into school and university curricula will equip viewers to watch films through a critical lens and to question representations of ageing. It could ultimately be a personally beneficial process because as one researcher has noted ‘ageism is a strange case of prejudice against the older you’ (Nelson, 2011, p.37).

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End of manuscript

Chapter summary

This chapter summarises the reasons why I consider critical discourse analysis to be an important weapon to combat ageist views and behaviours. Critical analysis of comedy film reveals inaccuracies, negativity and exaggeration in the depiction of age and age. I discussed how media representations influence viewers from an early age and can result in the development of opinions and beliefs about groups. Repeated exposure to stereotyping of ageing from middle age through to old age leads to the formation of views about what happens to people in those stages of life. When comedy films repeatedly show middle age to be fraught with crisis and old age to be categorised by ill health, reduced mental acuity and dependency, they contribute to negativity about ageing which results in ageist thinking and behaviours. The negativity in representations of middle age leads into representations of older people which are frequently even more negative. Ageism is not confined to any particular section of society. Unfortunately, as will be demonstrated in the literature review in chapter 2, studies have shown that health professionals, including nurses, can have ageist views which can affect the care they provide for older clients. As being subject to ageism can result in compromised mental and physical health requiring interventions by health professionals, it is doubly unjust if the care older people receive is in any way substandard as a result of ageism.

I introduced the study methodology which is dispositive analysis. Dispositive analysis is an approach of CDA and is well-suited to the study of discourse in film because it includes analysis of objects and actions as well as text and talk. Throughout the thesis I have chosen to use the English (Australian) spelling of 'ageing' but I have referred to a number of US studies where the preferred usage is 'aging'.

In the following chapter, I present the results of an extensive literature review of studies that looked at the representation of age and ageing in the media.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Dylan Thomas, 1971

Introduction

Ageism within the nursing profession has been a topic of interest to nurse researchers for many years. [Lookinland and Anson \(1995\)](#) surveyed 150 registered nurses and nursing students in the US and found that both groups held stereotypical views of older people. They noted that 'societal influences of 'ageism' begin shaping an individual's attitude at an early age (p.55) and they proposed education about ageing as a possible solution for combating ageism. More recently, a survey of more than 350 nurses in Australia and the UK concluded 'that urgent attention is required to address negative attitudes and to develop strategies for addressing ageism among nurses' ([Gething et al., 2002, p.74](#)). This recommendation is echoed by [Higgins, Slater, Van der Riet, and Peek \(2007\)](#), whose research into attitudes towards older patients amongst nurses in a New South Wales teaching hospital, revealed two main themes: 'marginalisation and oppression of older people' and 'stereotyping the older person' (p.230). Again in Australia, [Marshall \(2010\)](#) concluded that ageist behaviours were 'contagious' and students can become 'infected' unless registered nurses modelled positive attitudes towards older clients. Quality care comes from positive attitudes while negative attitudes and stereotyping hinders it ([Courtney, Tong, & Walsh, 2000](#); [Marshall, 2010](#)). It is an emerging theme among commentators that the nursing profession has a responsibility to address and eradicate ageism, not only within its own ranks as care providers, but also in the wider population ([Davis, 2009](#); [Griffith & Tengnah, 2010](#)).

In order to find ways of combating the development of negative attitudes towards older people, it is necessary to examine the source of stereotyping - both negative and positive. A rich and easily-accessible source of images of all societal groups is the visual media of film and television. This literature review, therefore, examines research findings from studies that investigated how older people are represented in the media of film, television and television advertising. The review examines material in the 40-year period from 1969 (when ageism was first formally identified and named) to the current day in order to gain an insight into the topic and to gauge if there have been any significant changes during that period. The review is

intended to form the platform upon which to develop an in-depth study of how older people are depicted in comedy films.

The review does not cover the literature on depictions of disability in film and TV. While acknowledging that some older people develop disabilities and disabled people also age, the core of the review is depictions of older people: fit or unfit, in wheelchairs or able to walk, deaf or hearing, sexy or sexless. The prime focus is age, not (dis)ability. There is an overlap in the two discourses which stems from societal stereotyping and prejudice. [Longmore \(2003\)](#), in discussing the problems facing disabled people, makes the following statement:

...advocates have recognized that for most people with most kinds of disabilities most of the time the greatest limitations are not somatic but social: prejudice and discrimination, inaccessibility and lack of accommodations. They explain the difficulties of people with disabilities in social and vocational functioning not as the exclusive and inevitable consequences of bodily impairments, but as products of the interaction between the social and built environment as presently arranged and individuals who look or function in nonstandard ways ([p.2](#)).

This statement reflects the difficulties that *some* older people might face with challenges of the built environment (like stairs) and that *some* older people might function in a 'non-standard way' but, as ageing reflects the passage of time, the majority of older people look and function in a standard way for people of 50, 60, 70 or 80 years of age. The concerns of researchers looking at depictions of disability in film are largely the same as researchers looking into depictions of older people: that disability is stereotyped in negative ways and can lead to pejorative views of disabled people in real life. [Lawson and Fouts \(2004\)](#) note that many individuals, especially children, fail to differentiate between what they view on screen and reality. As will be seen below, this observation is common to findings of some research into older people on screen.

Method

The literature was accessed through a search of the electronic databases relevant to nursing and to media studies including AGELINE, CINAHL, MEDLINE, Google Scholar, OVID, and specialist media databases including Film and TV Literature Index and Film Literature Index. Only English language material was included. The key search words used were: stereotyping, ageism, ageing, middle-age, mid-life, cinema, television and advertising. Following critical appraisal, 84 research studies on ageism and media representations of age and ageing, dating from 1969 to 2013, were included in this review. Five papers discussing ageist attitudes and behaviours in the nursing profession were included to highlight the relevance of ageism to the provision of health care. Findings regarding ageism and ageist stereotypes were

analysed and grouped using the following eight themes: representations of older people in media for children; representations of older people on television; representations of older people in film; representations of older people in advertising; representations of older people's sexuality – unwatchable; positive versus negative representations of ageing, representations of middle age; and representations of older people in new media forms: computer gaming, Xbox and PlayStation.

Stereotypes of ageing in the media

In his *Declaration of the Rights of Older Persons*, gerontologist, Robert Butler states that 'older members of society are subject to exploitation that takes the form of physical, sexual, emotional and financial abuse, occurring in their homes as well as in institutions such as nursing homes, and are often treated in cruel and inaccurate ways in language, images, and actions' ([p.152](#)). This chapter reviews the literature that explores the images of older people in television, film and advertising, including research on the 'cruel and inaccurate ways' that images are used. Advertising was included because television and film advertisements are often like mini films and are, by nature, pervasive and persuasive. The literature reviewed includes papers on the nature, prevalence and effects of stereotyping from the UK, Canada, Australia, Sweden, Germany and China, but with the majority originating in the USA. With a few exceptions, most research indicates that older people are under-represented and are often depicted in a negative way.

[Hepworth \(1999\)](#) discusses how theories of ageing explore the pervasive influence of culturally-based constructions of ageing. This is echoed by [Overall \(2006\)](#), who argues that ageism is essentially a social construct and states, 'The rate at which one ages, how one ages, and the ways in which aging persons are regarded and regard themselves are accepted as being at least partly socially generated' ([p.129](#)). Ageism creates anxiety, fear for the future and unhappiness, especially for older people ([Palmore, 2005](#)). [Fisher \(1992\)](#) states that through viewing stereotypes, expectations of old age are shaped. Ageism not only affects older people from western societies - there is evidence that it is 'pan-cultural' ([Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005, p.273](#)). Ageism has links to sexism and racism, which discriminate on the grounds of gender or ethnicity but, unlike these other prejudices, has the potential to effect members of either sex and of any race and colour because, barring ill-health or accidents, old age awaits us all ([Laditka, Fischer, Laditka, & Segal, 2004](#); [Palmore, 2003](#)).

Several studies noted that negative stereotyping of older people by health professionals has resulted in degrees of compromised care ([Cuddy et al., 2005](#); [S. Horton, Baker, & Deakin, 2007](#); [Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000](#)). According to these studies, health professionals such as nurses and doctors discriminate against older patients by failing to

communicate effectively. Older people claim that they are not given information about their health and are left out of decision-making about their own care. [S. Horton et al. \(2007\)](#) describe how beliefs about the ageing process held by ‘doctors, nurses and others in the health care industry can have a large impact on the treatment and overall health of the elderly’ ([p.1030](#)). In addition, [S. Horton et al. \(2007\)](#) describe how older people can come to believe that negative stereotypes are true and thus slip into a decline which they have come to accept as inevitable. To support this argument, [S. Horton et al. \(2007\)](#) cites research by [Levy, Slade, and Gill \(2006\)](#), which found a link between hearing loss and poor self-image related to stereotyping about ageing, and a study by [Sarkisian, Prochaska, Wong, Hirsh, and Mangione \(2005\)](#), which linked age stereotyping to reduction in exercise.

In the 30 years since Butler first defined ageism, there appears to have been little change in the negative ways that older people are depicted in film, television and pictorial advertising. It is apparent that, not only is there little change in terms of a negative versus positive portrayal, but also, that the actual portrayals remain stereotypical and firmly-rooted in the walking stick, stooped posture, forgetful and eccentric old codger mould. In addition, older people are noticeably under-represented in these media. This is an important issue because, with the percentage of older people in society increasing, the absence of positive images of such a large group is a distortion of reality that is both unjust and detrimental. There is evidence that ageism, of which stereotyping in the media is a manifestation, leads to unhappiness, anxiety and fear for the future. Negative stereotyping of older people, resulting in bias and possible discrimination, is often termed ‘ageism’ - a term coined by the gerontologist, Robert Butler . Since Butler’s use of the term to describe prejudice against older people, other researchers have broadened the definition to include discrimination on the grounds of age in favour of or against members of any age group ([Bytheway, 2005](#); [Palmore, 1999](#)).

There are many stereotypes of older people. Several researchers use the same set of descriptors. The three positive stereotypes usually referred to are: Golden Ager – active, adventurous, healthy and well-travelled; Perfect Grandparent – intelligent, kind, loving and family orientated; and John Wayne Conservative – patriotic, nostalgic, religious, tough, proud and wealthy. The negative stereotypes are: Shrew/Curmudgeon – greedy, complaining, inflexible and nosy; Despondent – lonely, neglected, sad, tired and fragile; and Severely Impaired – senile, slow moving and thinking, sexless, sick and feeble; and Recluse – quiet, timid, dependent and forgetful ([Hummert & Levy, 2002](#); [Magoffin, 2007](#); [Schmidt & Boland, 1986](#)).

The importance of recognising the existence and influence of stereotyping in the media lies in the proposal of cultivation theory ([Gerbner & Gross, 1976](#)) which finds that, for some viewers, ‘television reality’ becomes ‘real world reality’. Gerbner and his colleagues

correlated data from content analysis of the images in television shows with data gathered from surveys of audience opinion in order to assess the influence of programs. Gerbner maintains that stereotyping and marginalising of older people are pervasive in television and film, and inform the real world view, both for younger people and for older people themselves.

The significance of cultivation theory for the nursing profession, who are also consumers of film and television, is that they are repeatedly exposed to, and may be influenced by, its negative and inaccurate representations of age and ageing. This influence can engender ageist attitudes and behaviours. The results for older people can mean suboptimal care.

Representations of older people in media for children

Children are exposed to picture books from an early age. When they cannot read, it is the illustrations that convey messages ([Dellmann-Jenkins & Yang, 1997](#)). By the age of four, children have developed an awareness of age and gender differences ([Papalia & Feldman, 2010](#)). Researchers have found that children as young as four (school age) have developed negative views of older people and a distinct bias against the attributes of older people ([Isaacs & Bearison, 1986](#); [Newman, Faux, & Larimer, 1997](#); [Rich, Myrich, & Campbell, 1984](#); [Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, & Moore, 2007](#)).

An analysis of depictions of older characters in prize-winning picture books for children from 1972-1983 compared to 1984-1995 found that, although the number of older characters showing positive attributes had increased, only 12% of the characters were older people ([Dellmann-Jenkins and Yang \(1997\)](#)). This is significant as the percentage of older people in first world countries is growing rapidly, with the figures for Australia showing that 24.3% of the resident population in the 2006 Census were aged 55 years and older ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007](#)). Therefore, even award-winning literature is unrealistic in the snapshot of society it presents to children. 'Invisibility' is a theme that runs through the literature on media images of older people. As will be examined below, the absence of older people is common to advertising, film and television.

Television has a socialising effect on those who watch it ([Gerbner & Gross, 1976](#)). This is particularly true for young children who, having limited experience of the real world, often have difficulty determining the difference between reality and fantasy ([Miller, 2003](#)). Watching television is central to the lives of many in western society. [Signorielli \(2001\)](#), citing [Vivian \(1999\)](#), states the average American watches television for three hours a day. Other research has put the figure much higher, at seven or eight hours a day where the household has a young person under age 18 ([M. M. Lee, Carpenter, & Meyers, 2007](#)). Television has become the main storyteller in the family, supplanting parents, teachers and religious organisations. The

messages that children receive have come through the dominant voice of the television set ([Signorielli, 2001](#)).

Nielson Media Research, an organisation operating in 100 countries, released its 2005-2006 viewing figures for the US in September 2006. The figures, which reflect the viewing habits of 25,000 people, show that television viewing has increased to an average of four hours and 35 minutes per day per individual. The report also comments that television is holding its own in the face of newer platforms and technologies, even with younger viewers. The research found that 12 to 17-year-olds had increased their viewing by 3% in 2005-2006 over the previous year ([Nielson, 2006](#)). In Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 2006 show 45% of children younger than 14 years of age watched television or videos for 20 hours or more per week. The figures were gathered during school term over a two week period ([Screen Australia, 2009](#)). [Signorielli and Bacue \(1999\)](#) found that, in many households, children were watching television even before they could talk. Current commentators echo the finding. As recently as March 2008, Professor Dimitri Christakis, commenting in a radio interview about a study he had recently completed at the University of Seattle, claimed, 'In 1970 in the United States at least, the average age at which children began to watch television was four years of age. Today, based on studies that we and others have done, the average age at which children begin to watch television is closer to four months of age' ([ABC, 2008](#)).

A favourite genre of entertainment for children is the animated film or cartoon. Several researchers have examined cartoons for depictions of older people. *The Simpsons* is an animated US television series which, having started off as a series of shorts in the *Tracey Ullman Show*, was launched as a show in its own right in December 1989. By 2000, it was the longest-running show on prime time television ([Fox, 2009](#)). [Scanlan and Feinberg \(2000\)](#) argue that *The Simpsons* is an excellent pedagogical resource. They state that the show represents 'a mini-society that encompasses all the major social institutions – education, family, mass media, government, religion, the economy – through the experiences of the “nuclear family” and their local community' (p.127). While [Scanlan and Feinberg \(2000\)](#) are excited about using the satirical portrayals of life in small town America to highlight inequalities, injustices and the various 'isms' for discussion and analysis in college classrooms, they have to acknowledge that there are inherent dangers. Without the guidance of teachers, students may fail to notice the satire behind the stereotypes and effectively 'buy into' the stereotype that is being pilloried.

The message being given out about older people in *The Simpsons* is personified in the character Abraham Simpson, who is the grandfather of the family. He is frequently mocked by his family on the grounds of his age and lives in a nursing home, where the care provided to him and other elderly residents often appears sub-standard. There is a danger that younger children watching *The Simpsons* or any other animated cartoon without the filter of a

questioning adult will believe that Springfield is really representative of society ([Robinson & Anderson, 2006](#)). [Scanlan and Feinberg \(2000\)](#) may see the following remark by Homer to his father – ‘Aw, Dad, you’ve done a lot of great things, but you’re a very old man now and old people are useless, aren’t they?’ ([p.130](#)) - as a wonderful opportunity to teach sociology to young adults. Other researchers, however, find such unmediated messages potentially dangerous and harmful ([Isaacs & Bearison, 1986](#)).

The purpose of a report by [Robinson and Anderson \(2006\)](#) on older characters in children’s animated television programs was to update and expand on earlier research by [Bishop and Krause \(1984\)](#), which looked at the depictions of ageing at the prime time for children’s viewing – Saturday morning. Both studies found that older characters played only minor roles in the shows examined and were of little importance to the plots. While Robinson and Anderson noted from their analysis that the portrayal of older characters was predominately positive (62%) compared to Bishop and Krause’s earlier study, which put the figure at 52% positive, they still found cause for concern in that 38% of older characters were portrayed negatively. In defence of their concern, [Robinson and Anderson \(2006\)](#) cite [Miller \(2003\)](#) who highlighted the difficulty children have in distinguishing between fantasy and reality.

Animated films from the Disney studio have featured, and continue to feature, in the childhoods of many children ([Robinson et al., 2007](#)). Disney is a ‘story telling organisation *par excellence*’ ([Boje, 1995, p.997](#)), therefore it has the ability to influence children’s perceptions of reality ([Miller, 2003](#)). Analysis of Disney feature films for the presence and role of older characters, their physical characteristics, personality traits, gender and race by [Robinson et al. \(2007\)](#) showed that Disney animated films portrayed more older male characters than older female, and greater numbers of white characters rather than black characters. Older characters were more likely to be incidental or marginal to the plot. Personality traits and physical characteristics were found to be largely positive, but a sizeable number of negative stereotypes were also described. These findings echoed an earlier study, which noted that stereotypes of older characters have persisted over time in Disney films, but positive portrayals have become more common in later films ([Towbin, Haddock, Zimmerman, Lund, & Tanner, 2003](#)).

Exposure to negative stereotypes of older people in film and television has a cumulative effect and, by the time children reach their teenage years, their views on older people are likely to have become fixed ([Chasteen, Schwarz, & Park, 2002](#); [Isaacs & Bearison, 1986](#)). [Magoffin \(2007\)](#) studied the portrayals of elderly people in ‘teen movies’ over the past 26 years and concluded that, from watching such films, teenagers may ‘come to believe that all old people are grumpy and senile’ ([p.61](#)).

In summary, in the literature examining portrayals of older people in media designed for children and young people, such as picture books, Disney films and 'teen movies', there is significant evidence of negative portrayals or invisibility of older people. When coupled with literature showing that children and young people are influenced by what they watch, this presence of ageism is disturbing because it may shape attitudes which, if they endure into adulthood, could have negative implications for older people.

Representations of older people on television

The first real interest shown in analysing the content of television programs for stereotyping and bias against older people started in the 1970s and early 1980s with Gerbner's development of cultivation theory. A 1980 study found that the more a viewer watched television, the more negative that person's perception of older people became ([Gerbner et al.](#)). Gerbner et al found that older people were grossly under-represented on television at that time and were portrayed as eccentric or foolish and treated with disrespect. Female characters fared much worse than males in all areas. Later researchers analysed content across three decades to gauge if there had been any change in these depictions; they found that there had been some improvement in the numbers and status of women ([Signorielli & Bacue, 1999](#)). However, this paper also found that, even at the end of the 20th century, male characters over the age of 65 were more likely to be classified as middle-aged rather than old, whereas women of the same age were seen as elderly. The US Anti-Ageism Taskforce at The International Longevity Center pinpointed a possible cause for the disappearance of older characters from both film and television with their finding that white men under 40 got most of the jobs writing for television and film in Hollywood ([International Longevity Center, 2006](#)). If true, this indicates, ironically, that ageism on film and television has spawned ageism within the industry itself.

The theme of invisibility of older people in 'TV land' is common to much research. [Lauzen and Dozier \(2005b\)](#) found that at the time of their study, Americans aged 60 or older formed 18% of the population, but were represented on television by only 4% of major characters. This echoes the findings of other researchers ([Gerbner et al., 1980](#); [Harwood & Anderson, 2002](#); [Kessler, Rakoczy, & Staudinger, 2004](#); [Signorielli, 2001](#); [Vernon, Williams, Phillips, & Wilson, 1990](#)). Gerbner et al had found a tiny 2.3% of television characters were aged 65 or older, whereas the American population at that time comprised about 11% older people ([Gerbner et al., 1980](#)). This study also found that in direct contrast to reality, the more television that viewers absorbed, the more likely they were to believe that 'old people are a vanishing breed' ([p.46](#)). This opinion was particularly true of younger viewers.

While most researchers have agreed that invisibility or under-representation is a likely fate for older television characters, there is some disagreement about who is the most favoured

group on television. [Signorielli \(2004\)](#) found that television celebrates youth while it 'neglects and negates the elderly' ([p.279](#)), whereas [Gerbner et al. \(1980\)](#) found that if the under-18 age group was hoping to see itself mirrored on television it would be very disappointed. This younger group would see itself making up only 8% of the fictional population as opposed to the actual figure of 30% in the real world. This finding indicates that both the old and the young are underrepresented on television.

There are a few dissenting voices who argue that the television picture is getting rosier for older viewers. [Bell \(1992\)](#) selected five television series, which were running in 1989, to propose that the negative stereotypes of older characters such as foolishness and eccentricity had been replaced by more positive stereotypes including being 'powerful, affluent, healthy, active, admired and sexy' ([p.305](#)). Bell acknowledged that the dramatic characters he had examined had little in common with the majority of older people. He referred to the reverse stereotype of fit, healthy, older people pursuing all kinds of activities that were usually reserved for younger wealthier characters. Bell stated that, while this may be an improvement of sorts, it only served as a fantasy for older viewers rather than depicting an accurate reflection of viewers' lives. In this discussion, Bell foreshadowed findings of later researchers who, in studies on advertising and government propaganda, found that there were those who sought to promote an image of a golden old age to further various agendas, such as a government's desire to defer the payment of aged pensions. Another dissenting voice is [M. Peterson \(1973\)](#), whose study found older people on television to be portrayed in a favourable light as happy and active. Other researchers regard this finding to be an anomaly ([Gantz, Gartenberg, & Rainbow, 1980](#)).

Whilst the representation of older men on television is disproportional to real life, older women characters are even more likely to be invisible ([Gerbner et al., 1980](#); [Harwood & Anderson, 2002](#); [Kessler et al., 2004](#); [Lauzen & Dozier, 2005a](#); [Signorielli & Bacue, 1999](#); [Vasil & Wass, 1993](#); [Vernon et al., 1990](#)). Only 30% of older characters on US prime time television are women ([Briller, 2000](#)). [Lauzen \(2008\)](#) reported that the numbers of female characters on television had increased in 2008, with 43% of characters being women. However, there were still twice as many male characters over 40 years of age than female ([Lauzen, 2008](#)).

Several researchers found that women appeared to age more quickly than men on television ([Gerbner et al., 1980](#)). Where men and women aged 65 or older were depicted on television, 28% of the men were still playing productive roles, whereas only 10% of women were similarly cast. Thus 90% of female characters over the age of 65 were depicted as old and non-productive ([Gerbner et al., 1980](#)). Nearly a quarter of a century later, [Signorielli \(2004\)](#) found that women between the ages of 50 and 64 were more likely to be classified as elderly rather than middle-aged ([p.279](#)). Characteristics, both physical and of personality, are rated more negatively for older women than for older men ([Vernon et al., 1990](#)). Images of older men

are more physically attractive than older females ([Deusch, Zalenski, & Clark, 1986](#)). This theme is taken up by writers such as [Wolf \(1991\)](#), who described how images of beauty are used against women. [Cohen \(2002\)](#) agrees with Wolf. She found that when men age, they are viewed as distinguished and mature while older women are seen as ugly with grey hair and wrinkles ([p.601](#)). [Wolf \(1991\)](#) illustrates the necessity for women to be attractive to maintain a face on television with the example of female ‘anchors’ or newsreaders being valued for appearance as opposed to the value of male newsreaders lying in their authoritative tone and experience. [Cohen \(2002\)](#) also found that women experienced the double prejudice of ageism and sexism. Furthermore, Cohen noted that for some women the burden is tripled by adding racism to the load. It is a cruel twist that television is so unkind to older viewers, because for many retired, older people the television is a trusted and loved source of entertainment. A participant in a study by [Donlon, Ashman, and Levy \(2005\)](#) said that older people watched television because it helped them to feel like part of the world. It must be hard to feel part of a world that has rendered your age group, and possibly also your gender, invisible.

Participants in a study to raise awareness in older people of stereotypes and negative images of their age group, reported they had become aware that older people were missing from television ([Donlon et al., 2005](#)). One of the group, on discovering this said, ‘It teaches us that old people don’t count’ ([p.315](#)). [Korzenny and Neuendorf \(1980\)](#) agree that television influences the way older people think about themselves as members of society. [Cohen \(2002\)](#) urges viewers to develop media literacy skills in order to challenge negative stereotypes.

A common finding in the literature on ageism appears to be a consensus that prejudice based on age is an enduring feature. It is interesting to note that there has been little research on how this is affecting successive generations and how skills can be developed to encourage viewers to question, challenge and deconstruct what they watch.

Representations of older people in film

Viewing films in a cinema as well as on television or on DVD remains a popular form of entertainment. The Motion Picture Distributors Association of Australia’s published figure for Australian cinema admissions in 2008 is 84.6 million. That represents four admissions per capita ([Screen Australia, 2009](#)). Movie attendance is particularly popular amongst youth with 93 per cent of 15–17 year olds and 85 per cent of 18–24 year olds watching a film in a cinema at least once in the 12 month period to June 2006 ([Screen Australia, 2009](#)).

As with television, researchers generally agree that film has the power to influence the audience, particularly younger viewers ([Considine, 1985](#); [Magoffin, 2007](#)). Younger viewers tend to view portrayals on film uncritically and the perceptions they gain from their viewing may be enduring ([Korzenny & Neuendorf, 1980](#); [Nelson, 2002](#)).

[Magoffin \(2007\)](#) examined the genre of teen films in particular and concluded that teen films contributed to negative stereotyping of older people by presenting older characters who were frequently angry, lonely, senile or even bad drivers. Other researchers point out the danger of media such as films perpetuating stereotypes ([Bach, 2006](#); [McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2000](#)). The comments of [Cohen-Shalev and Marcus \(2007\)](#) summarise the depictions of old age and ageing in film as being for the most part ‘narrowly stereotypical, doing little justice to the complex and variable phenomena of old age’ (p.85). [Fisher \(1992\)](#) conducted a course using commercial films to sensitise students to negative images of older people on screen with the intention of creating in them a realisation of the positive potential of later life. This study had similar aims to Cohen’s 2002 study which also aimed to raise awareness of negativity and unfavourable portrayals of older women to ultimately produce positive outcomes both for students who aim to work with older people and the clients they serve.

Several researchers have examined high-earning films to find evidence of a bias against older characters. A general finding has been the lack of female older characters. [Lauzen and Dozier \(2005a\)](#) echoed a line from the film *The First Wives Club* in noting that ‘there are only three ages for women in Hollywood: babe, district attorney and driving Miss Daisy’ (p.437). Women’s characters hardly ever aged beyond 20 or 30, but male characters were able to age until at least their 40s. This double standard has also been described by other researchers, who note diminishing mental and physical attributes for female characters ([Bazzini, McIntosh, Smith, Cook, & Harris, 1997](#); [Vernon et al., 1990](#)). [Lauzen and Dozier \(2005a\)](#) who looked at 100 top-grossing films from 2002, summed up by stating, ‘If representation on the silver screen connotes social worth and importance, then absence denotes social obscurity. The intermingling of age and worth consigns women over 40 to limited exposure and character roles’ (p.443). In a study of a 100 films spanning five decades, [Bazzini et al. \(1997\)](#) found women to be ‘less friendly, less intelligent, less good, possessing less wealth, and being less attractive’ (p.541).

The phenomenon of older female actors being overlooked, both in the roles they are offered and the plaudits that they receive, is continuing ([Chivers, 2011](#)). Goff’s (2008) commentary on the 2008 Academy Awards broadcast found that younger women were more likely to win an Oscar compared to older women. In addition, Goff notes that during the banter that accompanies the awards, older actresses ([Sickels, 2008](#)) were often exposed to ageist jokes. Judi Dench is cited as an example of a female actor who has the courage to take on an unattractive role but Goff finds it significant that when an older female actor takes on unglamorous roles, it is often a death knell to their Oscar winning hopes.

Representations of older people in advertising

As the population of older people grows, at least in Western societies, there has been a burgeoning interest among researchers to gauge how they are portrayed in advertising ([M. M. Lee et al., 2007](#); [R. T. Peterson & Ross, 1997](#); [Robinson, Popovich, Gustafson, & Fraser, 2003](#); [Williams, Ylanne, & Wadleigh, 2007](#); [Zhang et al., 2006](#)). Modern advertisements are often mini films, which strive to maintain viewers' attention by being memorable, amusing, or risqué in some way. There have been advertisements that feature famous people in various scenarios in an effort to sustain interest such as the Nespresso coffee advertisements' use of the actor George Clooney, and others which use a repetitive motif that, by its eventual familiarity, becomes synonymous with a product – 'oh what a feeling, Toyota!'. Advertisements have become a genre attracting a following even though they are ostensibly an adjunct to the medium of television. The owner of a website which invites users to download their favourite advertisements claims that, on average, his site has 4000 downloads per day ([Savage, 2013](#)).

[Wood \(1989\)](#), in an article reprised on the Center for Media Literacy website (2002-2007), comments on the prevalence, yet folly, of ageism in advertising with this comment about older people:

They are as economically, socially and politically diverse as any other segment of our population, comprising sick and well, rich and poor, dynamic and depressed, all stripes of society, and they deserve to be portrayed that way, not shown as stuck in the mud, or in a wheelchair, or rocking and whittling, when in fact some may be rocking and rolling. Today, when we go over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house, Grandma may not be awaiting us sweetly with a big plate of cookies fresh from the oven. She may be working on the computer, or taking a psychology class, or holding down the late shift at the cannery ([p. not available](#)).

[R. T. Peterson \(1992\)](#) comments that advertisers try to mirror the values and attitudes of society as a whole therefore, if society undervalues and under-represents older people, advertising will reflect this. The implication is that older people do not have the spending power to be considered credible consumers of mainstream or luxury goods. This finding is echoed by researchers who analysed seven years of advertising in the magazines *Life* and *Ebony* ([Bramlett-Solomon & Subramanian, 1999](#)). They found older people were largely confined to advertising products associated with ageing. Other researchers also noted that older adult models, when used, extolled the virtues of laxatives and dentures rather than cars and clothing ([M. M. Lee et al., 2007](#)). Older people are often offended by stereotyping and object to being labelled as out of touch, ridiculous and unattractive ([Robinson et al., 2003](#)).

[Gabler \(2003\)](#), whose paper on the tyranny of the 18 - 49 demographic over the rest of America, is scathing of the lack of appeal to older people in American television advertising. Gabler scorns the notion that older viewers are unlikely consumers. He defends his position by citing that Americans over 50 control 55% of the discretionary income in America. He sums up by stating that 'older consumers are growing at a faster rate than younger ones, have more money to spend than younger ones and actually spend more of that money than younger ones' (p.11). This argument is supported by the findings of other researchers ([R. T. Peterson & Ross, 1997](#); [Robinson et al., 2003](#)). In the UK, [Healey and Ross \(2002\)](#) interviewed older viewers about their perceptions of 'themselves' on television. Participants pointed out the predominance of advertisements for incontinence pads and retirement homes on daytime television, which they found embarrassing and patronising. One older man said that he had a much higher disposable income than many younger people and was 'just as interested in buying a Ford Focus as a younger guy' (p.109).

As with other media genres examined, older adults are under-represented in advertising. For example, [Gantz et al. \(1980\)](#) found that older adults appeared in only 5.9% of advertisements taken from seven US magazines. [M. M. Lee et al. \(2007\)](#) found that in television commercials, the figure was 15% - an improvement on Roy and Harwood's study from 10 years earlier, which put the figure at 6.9% ([Roy & Harwood, 1997](#)). Women continued, however, to be under-represented in comparison to men. In advertisements where older characters were featured, women appeared in 38% while men appeared in 82% ([M. M. Lee et al., 2007](#)). In the UK, [Whitfield \(2001\)](#) found that younger women were used in advertisements even when, logically, an older female should be used. In Whitfield's study of magazine and newspaper advertisements, older men were noticeably more prominent than women in powerful roles and were often photographed against office or restaurant backdrops.

Although under-represented, older people are generally portrayed positively in advertisements ([Roy & Harwood, 1997](#)). This is possibly because happy, healthy models sell products more effectively than sick and feeble characters. One study from the UK found the evolving images of older people in the *Olivio* margarine advertisements to be breaking new ground for depictions of elders. Older Italian models were used in the campaign to challenge stereotypes of older people being disinterested in sporting activity, disinterested in sex, afraid of challenges, ugly, stiff and unhappy. The study's authors deconstructed the messages of the advertisements to examine images of longevity ([Williams et al., 2007](#)). The study found that over the course of the campaign older people were shown to be evolving from traditional roles to be shown as 'increasingly adventurous individuals' (p.1).

A Canadian study ([Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013](#)) contrasted two advertising campaigns – a 2001 Geezerade campaign from 2011 which represented ageing bodies as

‘grotesque’ ([p.53](#)) and the other run by *Zoomer*, a magazine for the over 45s. A ‘Zoomer’ is defined by the magazine as a ‘boomer with zip’ ([p.56](#)). The researchers found that the two campaigns polarised representations of older people from almost entirely negative in the Geezerade promotion to being overwhelmingly positive in *Zoomer*. The authors of the study came to the conclusion that the presence of these binary models of ageing ‘remain entrenched in Western society’ ([p.61](#)) and therefore do little to accurately represent the diversity of body types or lifestyles of older people ([Low & Dupuis-Blanchard, 2013](#)).

Representations of older people’s sexuality - unwatchable

An issue that has prompted investigation by a number of researchers is the taboo subject of sexuality for older characters in film, television and in advertising images. Bell’s research ([1992](#)) concludes that prime time television does not have the desire or ability to feature an intimate relationship between an older man and woman. An analysis by German researchers of 30 characters aged 60 or older in prime time series on German television came to the same conclusion ([Kessler et al., 2004](#)). They found that older female characters had no sexual life and only three of the 19 male characters had a sexual relationship. All three of those relationships were heterosexual. [Walz \(2002\)](#) also found sexuality of older people to be taboo. He found older women, having outgrown their reproductive years, to be depicted as either content to be spending their time nurturing grandchildren, or as dirty old crones, sexually-undesirable, looking for cans in rubbish bins ([p.100](#)).

[Walz \(2002\)](#) chose the film *Grumpy Old Men* to illustrate the non-sexual images of the older man. The film’s main characters are cantankerous old men, who spend their time in the company of other equally-belligerent old men, occasionally talking about sex but rarely partaking. Researchers find that older males’ sexual behaviour is more often portrayed on screen than older women’s ([Bildtgård, 2000](#); [Walz, 2002](#)). These depictions may be uncomfortable; for example, the older man, whose interest in sex has been retained but in inappropriate ways, such as being desirous of children or very young women ([Walz, 2002](#)). Where Walz differs from [Kessler et al. \(2004\)](#) is that he sees the times to be changing and is convinced that the so-called ‘baby boomers’ will ‘challenge the existing representations and forge new ones’ ([p.111](#)). In a positive finding for older men, a sense of masculinity and still being regarded as a man, albeit old, was noted by one study ([Thompson, 2006](#)). This contrasts with the sexless image of the old crone or caring grandmother ([Walz, 2002](#)).

A Swedish study looked at nine films shown in Sweden from 1990 to 1995 to explore representations of older people’s sexual lives ([Bildtgård, 2000](#)). In this study, the author challenges the prevailing cinematic depictions of older people as lacking a sexual life; she argues that the lack of such depictions causes viewers to feel ashamed of their own sexuality.

[Bildtgård \(2000\)](#) discerned a set of five ‘rules’ in the films she reviewed which, she claims, govern the possibilities of on-screen romance or sexual behaviour of older characters. The rules include presence of affection, possession of a well-preserved body, being lively, conforming to gender expectations and the necessity for the participants to be single. She further argues that the central reason why older people are not portrayed as sexually active is that their bodies are perceived to be old, ugly and unhealthy. Bildtgård, like [Walz \(2002\)](#), is optimistic about future depictions of older peoples’ sexuality. She concludes her study by mooted that the present generation of well-off, middle-aged people, who have been raised in sexually-liberal societies, will pave the way for the ‘suitable treatment of elderly people’s sexuality on the screen’ ([p.182](#)). Whether this prediction is validated or not remains to be seen. However, in 2010 *Beginners* ([Mills](#)) was released and explores the ‘coming out’ of a 78-year-old gay man, and 2012 saw the release of *Hope Springs* ([Frankel](#)), which follows the experiences of a middle-aged couple whose marriage has lost its sexual intimacy. Both films are billed as comedies which may indicate that, although the topic is getting more airplay, late life sexuality is considered to be more humorous than normal.

Positive versus negative representations of ageing

[Katz \(2001\)](#) researched the notion of positive ageing, rather than negative ageing, to examine how new concepts such as ‘anti-ageing’ affected older people. Katz stated that positive images of ageing included ‘activity, autonomy, mobility, choice, and well-being in defiance of traditionally gloomy stereotypes of decline, decrepitude and dependency’ ([p.27](#)). Katz found that the new, positive model for ageing masks any of the realities of illness, poverty and marginalisation faced by many older people. Thus what Katz is mooted is that the anti-ageing model, far from being inspired by a desire for social justice, is driven by consumerism and is the brainchild of the corporate world.

A British researcher, [Whitfield \(2001\)](#), writes of the tensions involved in using positive or negative images of older people. According to Whitfield, positive images are used to promote the value and self-worth of older people in government sponsored campaigns etc. but, at the same time, charities like Age Concern acknowledge that images showing older people as helpless victims bring a better response in terms of fundraising. [D. Allen \(2007\)](#) also recognises the need for film makers to highlight the plight of marginalised older people by emphasising their woes, but states that this approach condemns all older people to appearing ‘sad, depressed, lonely victims in need of rescuing’ ([p.10](#)). [Whitfield \(2001\)](#) concludes that stereotypes in all forms should be recognised and reduced.

Representations of middle age

Many researchers note that older people do not form one homogeneous group based on chronological years ([Bradley & Longino, 2001](#); [Whitfield, 2001](#)). Given that various researchers have chosen 45, 50, 55, 60 or 65 as their defined starting point for old age, the group cannot even be confined by an age span. For the purposes of this study, definitions of the start of 'old age' are not prescriptive. The lack of concord about what period of life is defined as old age has resulted in a bracketing of what is usually considered to be 'middle age' or 'mid-life' i.e. around 40-65 with the later period of life 65 years onwards. As a result there is very little material in the academic arena which deals specifically with media representations of middle age. In the informal literature, such as magazines and blogs, there is a definite interest in one topic related to middle age– mid-life crisis in film. An example is the on-line version of the popular film publication - *Empire Magazine*. In a piece entitled, 'Ten signs you're having a midlife crisis. What the movies tell us about growing old (dis)gracefully' the writer makes this comment:

Getting older in movies is, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, about raging against the dying of the light, preferably with an array of fast cars, blondes, crazed road-trips. It's largely a male preserve on the big screen - actors like Greg Kinnear, Jack Nicholson, Bill Murray, Michael Douglas and Nicolas Cage have made it their own... ([De Semlyen, 2010, p. not available](#))

Representations of older people in new media forms: computer gaming, Xbox and PlayStation

It is interesting to note that there is a paucity of literature on depictions of older people in the more recent media forms such as video gaming via computer, Xbox or PlayStation. However, internet trawling revealed a variety of blog sites and chat rooms, where game content was being discussed. A significant amount of content centred on negative images of older people as featured in games. Several games have been noted to feature both ageist stereotypes and cruel, demeaning language content aimed at the elderly. Gerbner's Cultivation Theory has demonstrated that prolonged exposure to the artificial world of television effects perceptions of reality. The popularity of gaming, particularly with young people, exposes players to negative and gratuitously cruel depictions of older people. The effects of this exposure have not been widely examined. This is a topic for future research.

Conclusion

The literature that has examined depictions of older people in film, television and advertising does not paint a rosy picture of life after 40, 50, 60, or 70 or whatever age the researcher deems that old age begins. Even to consider that a 50 year old person is old seems in itself an ageist view at a time when life expectancy for women in Australia is around 82. However, researchers have found that at 50 and beyond, very few women appear on the silver screen or television. Men fare better but are still, in the words of several researchers, virtually invisible.

Ageism is unacceptable in all spheres of life however when health workers, including nurses, absorb the prevailing ageist views depicted on film, television and advertising and modify their behaviour accordingly, there can be unpleasant and demeaning outcomes for their clients. A range of negative interactions, from unnecessarily raised voices and patronising language to misdiagnosis, misinformation and maltreatment can ensue.

The paucity of material on representations of middle age is noted. It appears that, apart from being a time of crisis, particularly for men, the years from about age 40 onwards have not been differentiated from much later stages in life. Ignoring the diversity of life styles and interests that preoccupy an age range of more than 40 years serves to divide populations into just two groups – ‘old’ and ‘young’. This ignores the gradual changes and enriching experiences that shape people as they age. There is a gap in the literature in relation to what middle age looks like on screen and what it means for the discourse of ageing.

The sexuality of older people has also been largely glossed over in the media of film and TV. It has proved to be a subject which younger viewers find uncomfortable however there seems to be some movement towards more realistic representations of ‘senior sexuality’. There is a need for more research into how late life sexuality is being treated by the media so that the contrasting reality of people enjoying a life rich in all experiences, including sexuality, can be pointed out.

The baby boomer generation is reaching retirement age; it is unlikely that such a large and vociferous group will go gently into that night. The research examined in this review indicates negative images result in anxiety, marginalisation and a lack of self-worth. No society can afford to thus alienate such a large portion of its population. It would be valuable to investigate whether or not exposure to positive and more realistic images of older people would reverse negative perceptions of later life.

Chapter summary

This chapter presented the findings from a review of the literature on representations of older people in the media of film, television and advertising. A sample of papers related to ageist attitudes and behaviours in nurses was included in order to demonstrate that ageism can be found even in the 'caring profession'. The findings from the literature indicate that negative representations and stereotyping of the process of ageing and older people are prevalent in the media and influence opinions about ageing and behaviours towards older people. The review highlighted a gap in the literature about representations of age and ageing in the genre of comedy film. This is a significant omission because comedy is the most popular genre of film and therefore, has the potential to have wide influence. It is to address the lack of research in relation to representations of age and ageing in comedy that this thesis was directed, with an intention of findings ways of improving film literacy and criticism especially among my colleagues in the health professions. Chapter three discusses the methodology and method which I chose as a framework for my analysis of the data set of nine comedy films.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

Introduction

The original aim of this study was to identify how age and ageing was represented in comedy film. While considering this issue, I watched numerous comedy films, the content of which touched on ageing in some way. During this process, two additional aspects of ageing on screen, which I had not noted before, appeared to me as significant. Firstly, I realised that comedy films about middle age frequently referred to a 'mid-life crisis'. Secondly, I noted that films showing older adult sexuality were still uncommon; filmmakers display uncertainty about how to treat this formerly taboo subject. I developed my research questions further to include both representations of middle-age and older adult sexuality in comedy film. Therefore, the research questions that this study seeks to answer are as follows:

1. How are age and ageing represented in comedy film?
2. How are issues relating to middle age represented in comedy film?
3. How is the sexuality of older adults represented in comedy film?

In searching for an appropriate lens through which to view representations of age and ageing in comedy film, I was mindful of the need to look critically at the subject matter. I wanted to analyse the data in a way that would highlight discrepancies between the portrayal of ageing on screen and the reality of ageing for the majority of people in Western societies. Empirical research has shown the link between negative stereotyping in the media and the development of prejudices against the subject group. Racism, religious and cultural intolerance, homophobia and ageism are all perpetuated through discursive practices, including media representations ([Hodgetts & Stolte, 2009](#); [S. Horton et al., 2007](#); [Shaheen, 2001](#)). The discourse of ageing appears to be overloaded with negative images of loss and decline which, as my literature review shows (see chapter 2), have a pejorative effect on the health and well-being of a significant number of people. At a time of increasing longevity, ageing should be accepted positively and normalised. I cannot separate myself from the discourse of ageing because, like every living person, I too am ageing and find myself caught up in, yet resistant to, the negativity of the discourse.

Critical discourse analysis is an approach to the exploration of discourse and discursive practices which allowed me as a researcher to identify what I considered to be instances of social injustice; I wanted to expose the ways this injustice is foisted on the community and propose ways to address and reduce the effects of that injustice. In this study, I used critical discourse analysis to explore the discourse of age and ageing in the genre of

comedy film so as to expose overt and covert ageist attitudes that such films portray and reinforce. I looked into the assumptions about ageing that filmmakers base such films upon. In the final chapter of this thesis, I propose ways of alerting viewers to oppressive stereotypes in comedy films and, in doing so, bring about a change in attitudes and actions that typify ageism. In this chapter critical discourse analysis and in particular, dispositive analysis, will be discussed and explained as the methodology of choice for this study. The history of critical discourse analysis will be explored and the specific critical discourse analysis approach, i.e. dispositive analysis, will be explained.

Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is the systematic appraisal of discursive texts such as speeches, newspaper articles, news broadcasts, television shows, films and the vast range of other semiotic mechanisms by which humans communicate socially, politically, didactically and culturally ([Locke, 2004](#)). The purpose of CDA is to uncover how power, dominance and control are exercised to the advantage of some groups over others through conscious or unconscious manipulation of linguistic and/or visual devices ([Fairclough, 1995](#)). Discrimination, inequality and injustice are perpetuated and gain currency through an imbalance in the control of discourses in public arena. Proponents of CDA aim to challenge this oppressive situation and effect change by exposing underlying ideologies and offering an alternative view. One of the leading CDA researchers, Norman Fairclough, describes the process of CDA as follows:

systematically explore often opaque relationships between a) discursive practices, events and texts and b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes, to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of, and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power ([1995, p.132](#)).

CDA is a relatively recent methodology and remains closely-associated with the developers of the practice. Ruth Wodak ([Wodak & Meyer, 2009](#)), one of the pioneers of CDA, has described a two-day meeting in Amsterdam in January 1991 when, like knights gathering at Camelot, CDA scholars met for two days to discuss and debate their different approaches. Discussing their theories and perspectives at those meetings were Theo van Leeuwen, Teun van Dijk, Norman Fairclough, Gunther Kress and Ruth Wodak herself. Each of these CDA champions brought different approaches to the table, which underlines an important aspect of CDA, namely that there is no single 'right' approach. The Amsterdam forum led to increased collaboration between these scholars including the 1993 release of a special issue of the journal *Discourse and Society* (volume 4, issue 2) in which the proponents of the different perspectives on CDA were able to discuss their work.

[Foucault \(1991\)](#), in his study on politics and discourse, noted that the intent of a speaker's message or of a writer's words was overshadowed by what the listener/reader understood by it. This view sits beside another that finds that writers, speakers, film directors and artists inevitably invest their output with their own meaning and agenda. Behind every text, therefore, is a struggle (often unconscious) for control of the discourse and this struggle privileges one class, one gender, one race or one generation over another. CDA seeks to expose power structures that underpin texts with the purpose of effecting a change by alerting viewers, listeners and readers to the concept that 'facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological power' ([Locke, 2004, p.25](#)).

Why critique discourse?

Subscribing to a particular discourse is usually unconscious and is caused by the naturalising effect of repeated exposure to opinions or ideas without exposure to the balancing effect of a contradictory view. This effect leads individuals to believe that their own view is the normal one and represents a common-sense attitude rather than a constructed reality ([Locke, 2004](#)). Thus certain understandings of the world become prevalent, accepted and go unchallenged.

In developed world societies, advances in labour-saving technologies and the introduction of workplace legislation governing working hours have resulted in increased leisure time. People have more time now to absorb information through a variety of communication channels. In Australia, much of the news in print and on television comes through a concentration of media outlets. News Ltd, for example, owns newspapers in the majority of Australian capital cities as well as television and film arms, suburban weekly magazines and a host of other 'glossy' magazines. The danger of receiving information through such a narrow funnel is that alternative or dissenting voices may not be heard. Even when a range of topics is covered, the choice of written and visual text covertly channels one viewpoint and one ideology. This is where CDA proves to be invaluable. As [Toolan \(1997\)](#) said,

if it [CDA] did not exist, we would have to invent it - and it perhaps has never been so important as it is today and for the foreseeable human future, as our lives are shaped more and more by information and communication (that is, discourse) and less and less by a relatively non-discoursal struggle to survive through physical labour ([p.101](#)).

CDA can be used as a way of unpacking the unacknowledged messages and persuasive nuances in almost any text: written, visual or spoken. Written texts from church newsletters to political manifestos seek to enlist support from their readers. The messages may

be overt 'the Christian way leads to fulfilment and eternal reward', 'vote for me and I'll reward you by fulfilling promises which benefit you' or they might be covert - steering readers towards their way by subtly discrediting an alternative view, employing fear tactics through language choice or by disguising their real motives through distraction or silence. Even the simplest traffic sign, such as 'one-way', indicates that there is a controlling authority that regulates traffic flow. There is an implication that to drive in the opposite direction is not allowed and penalties for this might be incurred. In the case of political speeches, choice of words, phrases, and even the juxtaposition of points, have the purpose of persuading readers/listeners that a particular view is reasonable and desirable. Van Dijk (1993) made a case for prefixing the words, 'discourse analysis' with the descriptor, 'critical'. He stated that,

The bulk of research in contemporary studies of language and discourse has been decidedly 'uncritical' if not 'apolitical', even when it has focused on the social dimensions of language use. Such studies, typically, have aimed to describe the world, and ignored the necessity to change it (p.131).

This view has commonality with theorists from the Frankfurt School such as Horkheimer and Habermas who, in their development of critical theory, rejected the notion of objectivity in what is presented as 'knowledge'. They proposed instead that 'knowledge becomes social criticism and the latter translates itself into social action, that is, into the transformation of reality' (Corradetti, 2011, p. not available). Thus CDA researchers have no desire to analyse text in order to find only meanings. CDA researchers seek to challenge meanings that signpost ideologies and hegemonistic underpinnings that might covertly influence readers and viewers. This function of CDA is what makes it an attractive approach for me as a researcher looking at representations of age and ageing in the medium of comedy film. This approach has allowed me to critically-evaluate the way the ageing process is represented in this genre and to challenge the accuracy of such representations and assumptions. CDA has provided me with a theoretical framework by which to explore the ways in which the chosen films represent 'reality'.

Concepts in CDA

CDA research looks at identifying and examining concepts such as cultural hegemony, ideology and power in texts. A brief outline will therefore be given on the meaning of those concepts in the context of discourse analysis.

Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci, Marxist philosopher and a founding member of the Italian Communist Party, conceived and developed the idea of cultural hegemony as a process whereby powerful groups like political parties, religions or media organisations, dominated the messages

disseminated to the public ([Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971](#)). Persuasive manipulation of semiotics influence recipients of a message to favour one set of beliefs and aims over another group's beliefs and aims. The disseminated messages and ideas often appear to be 'common-sense' truths and are absorbed by recipients and assimilated into their world view. [Fairclough \(2010\)](#) describes this as 'naturalising' discursive conventions, using the example of discursive relationships between doctors and patients ([p.129](#)). It has become a usual and accepted practice for general practitioners to address patients from a position of power behind a desk. At the end of a consultation the patient is given brief details of a diagnosis and perhaps a prescription. It is unusual for a patient to question a diagnosis or prescription. A naturalised convention such as this allows the doctor to see more patients in a time effective way and has become the accepted practice between doctors and patients. [Fairclough \(2010\)](#) explains that this type of naturalised discourse convention is an 'effective mechanism for sustaining and reproducing cultural and ideological dimensions of hegemony' ([p.129](#)).

Ideology

The term 'ideology' can be defined broadly as a way of thinking, consisting of beliefs, values and ideals, which a group of adherents hold on to as an ideal way for society to exist. Fascism and communism are both examples of ideologies which followers claim are a blueprint for a desirable society. CDA researchers are more interested in examining hidden ideologies that go unnoticed and unchallenged and are held by often disparate groups. Examples of these seemingly-innocuous world views in relation to ageism appear in the form of expressions such as 'I'm having a seniors moment' to excuse forgetting a fact or name. This sort of comment perpetuates the ideology of ageing as being about a universality of common elements including forgetfulness, incompetence and the need to apologise for those issues. [Mannheim \(1936\)](#), the Hungarian philosopher, proposed that everyone's personal ideology is a result of the context in which they live, work and play. Knowledge is determined by a person's social class, their moment in time and their geographical location. In relation to ageism and fear of ageing, Western society's unconscious beliefs about ageing have been built up by the influences society is subjected to, including film, television shows, jokes, advertising and political speeches.

Daniel Chandler, author of the popular primer on semiotics, *Semiotics: the basics* ([2007](#)), provides an interesting illustration of how a belief or ideology can become accepted as a taken-for-granted truth. He describes a semiotics class at the University of Aberystwyth in which he shows students two teddy bears, one dressed in blue, the other in pink. The students identified the pink bear as being intended for a girl and the blue bear for a boy. They were amazed to hear that in the early 20th century the opposite was true. The reason for this, according to a 1918 Chicago infants' wear buyers trade magazine, was that 'pink, being a more

decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy; while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl' ([p.156](#)). This demonstrates the tenuous nature of 'truths' which concern ways of thinking. Blue for a boy and pink for a girl has become so entrenched in the thinking of Western society that it has almost become a code in the way that red has come to mean danger or stop, and green now indicates go ahead. Giving the 'green light' to a project or other proposed action means permission or authorisation has been given to proceed. This expression, which had its genesis in the traffic light system, has become accepted, not only in English speaking societies, but in many other languages such as French and German.

Power

The concept of power is crucial to CDA. 'Discourses exercise power as they transport knowledge on which the collective and individual consciousness feeds. This emerging knowledge is the basis for individual and collective action and the formative action that shapes reality' ([Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.38](#)). Power and ideology are very closely-linked in that having power over a discourse allows authors/directors/orators/artists to give voice to an ideology, either overtly or covertly. Having power over others does not emanate solely from threat of violence or punishment. There are many ways people might manipulate language or images to elicit an emotional response thereby holding sway over the opinions of an audience. These manipulations include provoking anger or fear, stirring up feelings of empathy or sympathy, coaxing out a desire to help others through charitable donations, or persuading consumers to buy products. An example of an obvious exertion of power with benevolent intent is the overt use of carefully-chosen words and images to achieve a desired result, such as the use of images of swollen-bellied, starving children in Africa to raise money for famine relief. In other forms of discourse, power is often invisible, unobtrusive and therefore more dangerous. A recurring topic of interest for CDA researchers is racism. They endeavour to show the ways conveyers of messages choose words and images to manipulate readers and viewers into a fear and distrust of others.

In Australia, the discussion about asylum seekers is often couched in language and images designed to engender fear of the otherness of those who seek refuge. Journalists and politicians repeat terms such as 'queue jumpers' and 'illegals'. The terms gain currency and consequently, susceptible readers and listeners come to believe it is a criminal activity to seek asylum from persecution and violence. The opening paragraph from a *Herald Sun* news article illustrates the use of specific words to create a feeling that an invasion is about to occur in the heartlands of Australia: 'Thousands of asylum seekers are expected to flood the suburbs as the Federal Government rolls out bridging visas allowing boat people to live and work in the community and collect welfare' ([Marszalek & Benson, 2011](#)). Thousands of 'boat people

flooding the suburbs' gives rise to images of tsunami-like surging crowds of newcomers taking over suburbs, depriving locals of jobs and being paid allowances to which they are not entitled. Floods are adverse events that strike with destructive and deadly force. Describing asylum seekers in those terms can cause fear and tensions. Dehumanising the diverse nature of race and origin of refugees by calling them 'boat people' prevents readers from appreciating the shared humanity between those who seek asylum in Australia and those who already live here in relative comfort and freedom. In this instance, the Australian Press Council later upheld complaints about the implications in the article that asylum seekers are potentially dangerous and a threat to Australian communities. The treatment of asylum seekers is a polarising issue in Australia where one side seeks to 'turn back the boats' and prevent landings on Australian soil. The other side argues that it is a fundamental human entitlement, supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that people have the right to seek refuge from persecution ([United Nations Organisation, 1948](#)). The language and images chosen by stakeholders and commentators is designed to persuade audiences of the validity of an argument and ultimately capture votes for one political party or another.

When analysing the discourse for power in the context of film, a researcher can look at external sources [concerned with production of the film] and internal manifestations of power [covert or overt] within the narrative. Externally, there is power exerted by filmmakers over the choice of topic, the treatment of that topic, script, costuming, settings, actors and a host of other elements. Filmmakers may want to use their control of resources in the entertainment industry to expose the injustice of one group in society having power over another. An example of this is *Rabbit-Proof Fence* ([Noyce, 2002](#)) which highlights the power used by earlier Australian authorities to forcibly remove Indigenous children from their homelands and place them in white institutions.

The question of who is exercising power and to what end is more difficult to answer when one considers inaccurate and ageist representations of age and ageing in comedy films. It seems unlikely that any particular film company or director has an interest in perpetuating an ageist viewpoint. It is arguable, however, that an imperative to succeed at the box office and provide a decent financial return to investors has an impact on the choices made by filmmakers. Therefore filmmakers include formulaic stereotyping and representations of age and ageing, which audiences have found amusing in the past. In *Ferris Bueller's Day off* ([Hughes, 1986](#)), which still retains its status as a teenage cult classic, a car is seen driving down the road weaving from side to side. The driver is an old woman who is so short she can hardly see over the steering wheel. This stereotype of older people as bad drivers is a regular motif in comedy. In the comedy television series, *South Park*, an entire episode is given over to a battle between older drivers and young people who are trying to get them off the roads ([Parker, 2003](#)). The

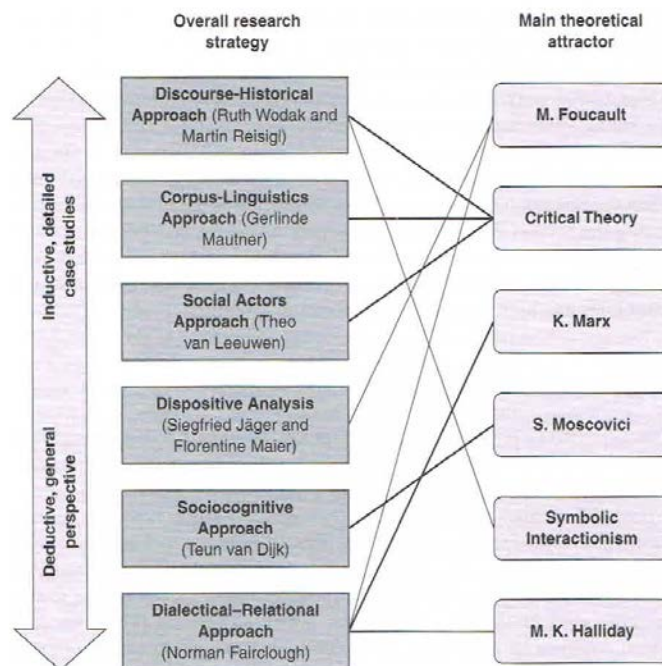
stereotype is flawed, but in the context of comedy film, that notion is secondary to the comic value it presents. In the United Kingdom, the Institute of Advanced Motorists (IAM) commissioned research into the ageing process and driver safety. One of the statistics it presented was that ‘people over 70 made up 9 per cent of drivers but 6 per cent of driver casualties, while drivers under 30 made up 20 per cent of drivers but 35 per cent of casualties’ ([IAM, 2011](#)). Thus the stereotype of older drivers being dangerous is a distortion of facts.

A third aspect of power in film concerns the points at which the narrative conceals a power imbalance or struggle. This ‘hidden’ portrayal of power might be unintentional on the part of the filmmaker because the incident or action has become entrenched in societal thinking as common-sense or natural. This is the ideal hunting ground for the critical discourse analyst because it is in these unchallenged representations that ageist ideas and behaviours are incubated and reared. An example of this occurs in a scene in *Quartet* ([Hoffman, 2012](#)) where four of the residents of a home for retired musicians want to go out to dinner. They have to beg and bargain for a ‘late pass’ from the home’s director. This display of power over the autonomy and independence of older people was not commented on by the characters in the film nor by reviewers of the film, which suggests that the power of staff to control the activities of people in residential aged care facilities has come to be accepted and unquestioned.

An overview of different approaches in CDA

[Wodak and Meyer \(2009\)](#) refer to CDA as a programme or school, rather than a theory, suggesting that CDA encompasses a number of disciplines which are connected yet distinct. Researchers who use CDA to explore their areas of interest come from a wide variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Politics, philosophy, linguistics, socio-psychology, and literary studies are among the fields which have an interest in underlying discourse. With such a variety of disciplines embracing CDA it is not surprising that the approaches taken are equally varied. Wodak and Meyer have mapped the overall research strategies used in CDA with their theoretical underpinnings ([2009, p.20](#)). This map is in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Overall research strategies and theoretical background
(used with permission from authors)



I have elected to use a dispositive analysis approach but, as mentioned, CDA is interdisciplinary and its various branches often overlap. For this reason, a brief overview of some of the other major approaches to CDA is useful.

Socio-Cognitive Approach (SCA)

This approach, favoured by Teun van Dijk, lies in the socio-psychological area of CDA. Van Dijk prefers the term critical discourse studies because the broader term ‘studies’ expands the approach to embrace critical analysis, critical theory and critical applications. SCA researchers examine discourse as a communicative process that includes text, gestures, facial expressions and a myriad of other signifiers. SCA has affinity with the Social Representation theory of [Moscovici \(1988\)](#) and contends that in discursive practice, social actors combine personal experience with collective perceptions formed by interaction with media, social groups and societal influences in general. Knowledge, attitudes and ideologies are all forms of social representation and are dynamic in that they change as society changes.

Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA)

This approach is usually employed in developing conceptual frameworks for analysing political discourse. Champions of this approach include Ruth Wodak and Martin

Reisigl. There are three aspects to this approach. Firstly, inconsistencies, paradoxes and other internal structures of discourse are found. Secondly, the manipulative characteristics of discursive practices are revealed by the researchers, using knowledge of context and relevant social theories in interpreting the discourse. Thirdly, researchers aim to improve discursive practices by positively contributing to the development of just and equitable texts for use in the discourses influencing the public arenas of school, hospitals and workplaces ([Wodak & Reisigl, 2009](#)). [Wodak \(1991\)](#) first used the DHA approach in a study that examined the anti-Semitic images emerging in public discourse during the Austrian presidential election campaign of 1986. Since that time the approach has been applied to diverse topics such as discrimination against Romanian migrants and the discourses on climate change and global warming.

Corpus Linguistics Approach

This is both a qualitative and a quantitative approach that contributes to CDA research by using computer software to analyse large volumes of textual data. Its value lies in allowing researchers to increase the empirical base with which they work, reducing researcher bias and subsequent accusations of subjectivity, and being able to incorporate quantitative and qualitative perspectives into CDA research ([Mautner, 2009](#)). This approach can be used across a variety of discursive modes. For example, [O'Halloran, Tan, Smith, and Podlasov \(2011\)](#) have examined the use of software to analyse discourse in television advertising.

Mautner provides an example of how a corpus linguistics approach can be used in CDA. Frequent repetition of value-laden descriptive phrases can influence an audience. Using a newspaper article as an example, Mautner demonstrates that using software designed for the task, such as 'Wordsmith Tools', a researcher can discern how often positive descriptive words like 'decent' 'hardworking' and 'law-abiding' are used in large volumes of text when describing members of society of which the newspaper editorial team approves. [Mautner \(2009\)](#) sums up the value of this as follows: 'large corpus evidence thus provides "checks and balances" by opening a window on values and attitudes present throughout a discourse community rather than held only by individual researchers' ([2009, p.138](#)). Corpus linguistics *contributes* to CDA rather than being a stand-alone method. I am much taken by Mautner's imagined Oscar night for CDA methods where corpus linguistics would pick up a statue as Best Supporting Actor.

Social Actors Approach (SAA)

A prominent proponent of social actors approach is Theo van Leeuwen who explores how social actors constitute and reproduce social structures as both groups and as individuals. van Leeuwen ([2009](#)) acknowledges the influence of Foucault in his definition of discourses as

‘socially constructed ways of knowing some aspect of reality’ (p.145). In other words, discourses are the framework people use to make sense of things in a specific context. In the discourse of religious practice, a cross on the outside of a building would be understood to indicate that the building is a Christian church. Van Leeuwen’s theory of social action derives from the work of [Halliday \(1985\)](#), whose ‘systemic functional grammar’ describes how linguistics can be seen as a tool to clarify the workings and order of the social world.

Dialectical-Relational Approach (DRA)

Norman Fairclough takes a stance based in the Marxist tradition. He explores texts to discover how social conflict is reproduced linguistically via dominance and resistance. [Fairclough \(1989\)](#) uses the linguistic theory of the linguist M.A.K. Halliday whose seminal work on systemic functional linguistics finds that social functions shape language - even in its grammatical structure ([1985](#)). Fairclough focuses his attention on problems of social injustice and uses his approach to CDA to bring attention to examples of this in discursive practices. [Fairclough \(1995\)](#) sees the relationship between society and discourse as being dialectical, that is, it works on a two way axis: society is shaped by language use and, at the same time, language is formed, shaped and influenced by society.

Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)

Some CDA researchers argue that analysis of multimodal texts such as photos, cartoons, film and music should be included when considering discursive practices ([Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006 \[1996\]](#); [van Leeuwen & Jewitt, 2001](#)). [Kress and van Leeuwen \(2006 \[1996\]\)](#) examine images including children’s drawings, road signs and sculpture. In their *Handbook of Visual Analysis* ([2001](#)), van Leeuwen and Jewitt include papers on the critical analysis of iconography, visual anthropology and film and television. The work of [Iedema \(2001\)](#) is another example of multimodal critical discourse analysis. Iedema locates the main body of his work in examining the way doctors, nurses and other health professionals communicate about organising their work. In a study on a television documentary about the service provided in a hospital, this author examines how filmic devices can have a ‘discursive impact’ on viewers (p.186). In a genre that is supposedly expositive and a ‘window on reality’, the selection of who, what and how to film inevitably reflects the director’s preferences and consequently influences audience perceptions. Iedema’s approach uses social semiotics ([Hodge & Kress, 1988](#)) and allows the researcher to be guided by her own interpretation. Importantly, an analysis of discourse undertaken through a social semiotic perspective has strong claim to relevancy rather than abstract theory. MCDA is closely-aligned to dispositive analysis, which is the methodological framework I have chosen for my study.

In this study I have used the umbrella term CDA to include MCDA as the principles and aims are similar - to expose the use of power in discursive practices which perpetuate ways of thinking and can be pejorative to the wellbeing of some members of society by privileging the rights of some groups over others.

Dispositive Analysis (DA)

Dispositive Analysis is concerned with knowledge and how this 'knowledge', embedded in discourses, is related to power relations. People's reactions to and interactions with a discourse are dependent on the types of knowledge they have been exposed to and absorbed since birth. Geographical location, time, social status and education influence what an individual considers to be truth or knowledge. Proponents of this approach include Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier ([2009](#)). They base their work on Michel Foucault's discourse theory but have identified a gap between discourse and the manifestations of that discourse in reality. They have filled this gap by drawing on the activity theory of the Russian psychologist [Leont'ev \(1981\)](#) who postulated that activity is mediated through prior knowledge, rules and the use of artefacts like tools and, most importantly, through the actions of a social actor. [Jäger and Maier \(2009\)](#) sum up the relationship between discourses and action by stating that discourses exert power because they are the mechanism by which knowledge is transmitted. Individuals and groups absorb knowledge and use it to develop further discursive and non-discursive practices (actions) that shape reality.

The term 'dispositive' has its origins in the discourse theories of Michel Foucault. [Jäger and Maier \(2009\)](#) describe it as the 'interplay between discursive practices, non-discursive practices and materializations' ([p.39](#)). They have developed a very useful 'toolbox' ([p.52](#)) for undertaking CDA using their approach:

- Choose a subject matter and put forward a rationale for the choice
- Choose a discourse plane, i.e. the platform for the discourse, and a sector or particular aspect of the platform. (In this study, the plane is film and the sector is comedy.)
- Choose the sample for analysis
- Undertake a detailed analysis of the chosen discourse within the sample including linguistics, semiotics, structure, ideologies, agency and power structures.

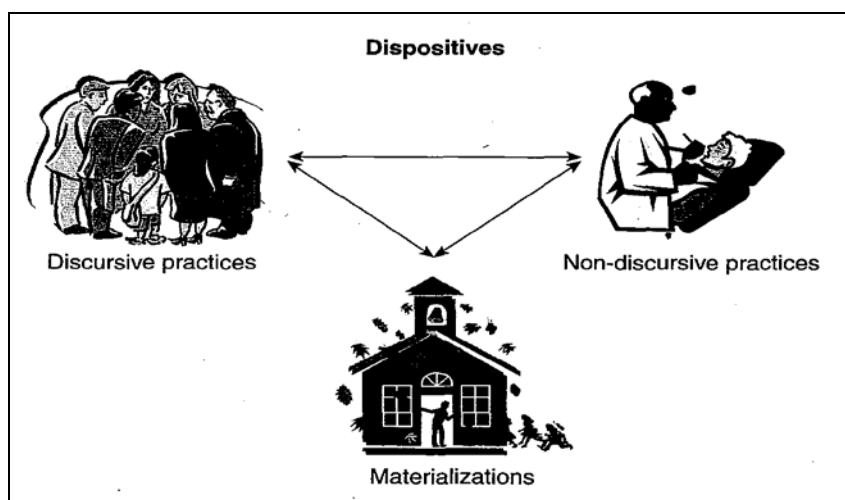
Having undertaken the above process, which forms the basis for any critical analysis of discourse, the dispositives are examined by asking the question 'how do language, action and material manifestations combine to constitute 'knowledge?'. In this study, the examination of dispositives in comedy film equates to analysing the words, actions and representations of people and objects in the discourse of age and ageing. For example, in the film *Wild Hogs* ([W.](#)

[Becker, 2009b](#)), analysing the meaning of non-discursive practices, such as going on a road trip, and materialisations, such as Harley Davidson motor bikes, will translate into discursive knowledge in the form of text. These elements can then be considered in conjunction with speech and text in the film and its metadata.

Jäger and Maier illustrate dispositive analysis diagrammatically (Figure 3) by showing a triangle with each of the elements of dispositive analysis.

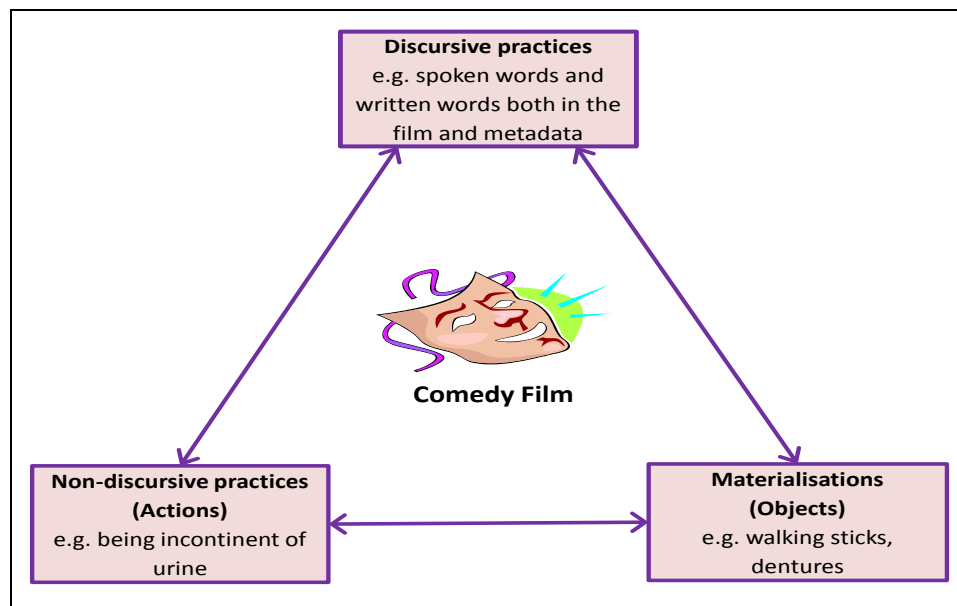
Figure 3: Jäger's and Maier's dispositives

[\(2009, p.57\)](#)



I have adapted this diagram slightly (Figure 4) to reflect the way I used the approach in this study; I show the way dispositive analysis was applied when looking at representations of age and ageing in the context of comedy film. The Jäger and Maier diagram shows the way the three elements of the dispositive are related, but it does not show the pictures are linked and related to each other. In other words, how does the non-discursive practice of dentistry relate to the materialisation of a school? I have attempted to go a step further to demonstrate how elements of the dispositive in a comedy might combine to represent age and ageing in the context of a particular film.

Figure 4: Dispositive analysis as applied to age and ageing in comedy film



I chose the Jäger and Maier approach of dispositive analysis because there was a fit between these methods and my research questions about the discourse of age and ageing in comedy film. I wanted to look at a wide variety of elements in film and find a way to incorporate actions and objects into the discourse. Dispositive analysis is ideally-suited to this purpose because it has ‘a broader reach and an explicit intention of analysing not just texts, but actions and objects, and crucially the links between them and the power relations that these strategically linked texts, actions and objects create’ (Caborn, 2007, p.116). The dispositive in terms of film includes ‘everything that is laid out in front of the spectator, together with all the elements that allow the representation to be viewed and heard’ (Albera & Tortajada, 2010, p.10). Therefore this study can include, not only what is said and seen in the film, but also musical soundtrack, costuming, posters, reviews, websites, CD cases and other relevant elements.

I have not excluded other approaches to CDA from influencing my work. Far from being anxious that I have not been faithful to my chosen approach, I am heartened by the comments of van Dijk (2001b) who urges and salutes diversity in CDA research:

In my many years of experience as editor of several international journals, I have found that contributions that imitate and follow some great master are seldom original. Without being eclectic, good scholarship, and especially good CDA, should integrate the best work of many people, famous or not, from different disciplines, countries, cultures and directions of research. In other words, CDA should be essentially diverse and multidisciplinary (pp.95-96).

Therefore, while broadly adhering to the approach of Dispositive Analysis, I have adopted the multi-disciplinary tradition of CDA by integrating film theory, critical literary theory, social semiotics and aspects of other CDA approaches.

In summary, the CDA approach chosen is based on dispositive analysis because of the opportunity this type of analysis offers for exposing unjust discourses and non-discursive practices in the representations of age and ageing in film and taking a stance against such practices. This methodology also allows for the celebration of any instances of resistance against stereotyping and offers scope for effecting change. As CDA is essentially an interdisciplinary pursuit, elements from film theory and literary criticism complement and influence the chosen principal methodology.

Methods

The first task in undertaking a critical analysis of the way age and ageing is represented in comedy films was to select the sample of material for consideration. I wanted to have a selection of films which were typical of the comedy genre but I was also bound by the imperative for the material to feature older people or to be concerned in some way with issues of age and ageing. [Wodak and Meyer \(2009\)](#) in a summary of CDA methodology note,

In a nutshell we might conclude that...there is little discussion about the statistical or theoretical representativeness of the material analysed. Although there are no explicit statements about this issue one might assume that many CDA studies (perhaps with the exception of Teun van Dijk and Ruth Wodak) mostly deal with only small corpora which are usually regarded as being typical of certain discourses ([p.25](#)).

I devised strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the films selected for this study were indeed typical of the discourse of age and ageing. Therefore the dataset consisted of a relatively small body of material.

Inclusion criteria

As discussed in chapter 1, I chose the comedy film genre for analysis because of the propensity of humour to give voice to ideas that might be unacceptable in other contexts. The act of laughing relieves stress, creates a feeling of wellbeing and promotes social bonding ([Dunbar et al., 2012](#)). I suggest that, because it is arguably pleasurable to be happy, any qualms about the propriety of laughing at a particular subject are suppressed and, thus, racist, sexist or ageist references may pass unchallenged.

The first inclusion criterion is therefore that the film has been described as a comedy by its producers. The word comedy must have appeared as the descriptor of genre on the DVD cover. Animations designated as 'family' such as Disney/Pixar cartoons which satisfied all other criteria were included even if they were not designated as 'comedy' because the genre contains frequent slapstick elements and comedic characters. Films which had additional tags describing the comedy were also eligible. For example, films described as 'action comedy thriller' such as *Red* ([Schwentke, 2010](#)), were considered.

The film needed to have some direct or indirect connection to age or ageing. This could be in the title such as - *Old Dogs* ([W. Becker, 2009a](#)) or *Grumpy Old Men* ([Petrie, 1993](#)). Reference to age or ageing could also feature in the metadata of the film including posters, reviews, blogs, DVD covers or commentary included as an extra feature on DVDs. References to ageing included words associated with aging such as grandmother, grandfather, middle age or concepts such as retirement, mid-life crisis and 'lost youth'. References also included contexts and locations such as nursing homes, retirement 'villages' and hospitals. Visual semiotics in the meta-data often used in stereotyping of old people such as walking sticks, wheelchairs, old fashioned clothing also rendered a film eligible for inclusion. An example of a visual reference to ageing in metadata is an advertising poster found on Google images for the family comedy animation *Arthur Christmas* ([Smith & Cook, 2011](#)) in which 'grandsanta', who is standing with his walking stick, is described as being 'All cane. No candy' (["All cane. No candy.," 2011](#))



The parameters for age of significant characters in each film were not firmly specified. There was no maximum age limit set for inclusion. The lower age limit is loosely defined around whether ageing is seen by the character or by his peers as being problematic. For example, films concerning mid-life crisis such as *Wild Hogs* ([W. Becker, 2009b](#)) and *About Schmidt* ([Payne, 2002](#)) feature men in their 40s and 50s in the former and a man in his late 60s in the latter. In these two films, there is a common theme of going on a journey, literally, in order to recapture a sense of themselves and their aspirations, which they have lost with age.

The film needed to have achieved a reasonable degree of popularity with audiences. Popularity can be determined by a variety of different measures including box office takings and inclusion in the top 1000 comedy films in the IMDb film data base. Basic information about films can be accessed on the IMDb film data base without payment. Other measures of popularity are DVD rental and sales figures which can be obtained from a number of websites including <http://www.the-numbers.com>.

To be considered for inclusion the film must be readily-available for purchase and rental in DVD format in Australia. The film must be in the English language. Foreign language films do not often feature in top comedy film charts in English-speaking countries. It has been noted that sub-titling is a complex process in which the constraints of space and the ability of viewers to simultaneously read text and follow action is sometimes problematic ([Koolstra, A.L., & Spinhof, 2002](#)). The impact of humorous devices such as puns, double-meanings and deliberate mispronunciation can be affected by translation, so what might be a very witty remark or quip in French, or a German idiom for example, may lose impact when translated into English.

Exclusion criteria

Films set in an historical period at a considerable distance prior to the present day (now 2013) were excluded. The rationale for exclusion was that period pieces often encompass the moral values, cultural practices and societal attitudes relevant at the time and might not be relevant today. In the film, *Tom Jones*, an adaptation of Henry Fielding's classic novel set 18th century English countryside, factors like advances in the status and rights of women, and a significant increase in longevity might mean that this film is unlikely to influence modern-day viewer attitudes. Eighteenth-century costuming, language and the vast gulf between social classes serve to corral this popular and successful comedy as a 'period piece' and this severs the connection to the 'here and now' reality. In the example of *Tom Jones*, where all characters are dressed in period costume and the time setting is around 150 years earlier than the present day, there is a sense that even the lusty young hero is out of step with current societal views and opinions.

Silent films were not included in the dataset because linguistic depth and richness is sacrificed in the subtitling process. Linguistic features such as intonation, nuance, hesitations, voice pitch and timbre, accent and emphasis are lost in silent films. Therefore the genre of silent comedy films, including the work of Chaplin and Buster Keaton, were excluded. The 2011 Oscar winning-silent comedy, *The Artist*, similarly, was not eligible.

Films classified as 'X 18+' were not included in the dataset because, in Australia, X 18+ rated films are only available for purchase in the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory. The content of these films renders them popular with a small niche market and they are unlikely to be shown in mainstream cinemas.

'Coming of age' films about teenagers becoming adults and films about the experience of adolescents during puberty were excluded because, despite the anxiety around acne, facial hair and first sexual encounters, there is a sense of anticipation of being on the cusp of something momentous and exciting in most comedies of this sub-genre.

Films concerning retirement were deemed ineligible if the character was retiring at what would be considered an unusually early age due to the nature of their work. Sportsmen and women and fashion models fit into this category. For example *Zoolander* ([Stiller, 2001](#)) concerns the woes of a fashion model at the end of his career which, for this character, is in his early 30s.

Initial selection of relevant films for analysis

This section outlines the next step in selecting films for inclusion in the dataset used for detailed analysis. A list of comedy films was downloaded from IMDb on 2 December 2012. The initial plan was to download IMDb's top 1000 comedy films as being an adequately large number from which to select films with a connection to the themes of age and ageing. The number, however, was increased to 1500 when the original body of 1000 films did not contain a number of films identified as being potentially relevant. These films appeared in the extended list of 1500 films.

One film I identified as potentially-worthy of inclusion and analysis was *Lost in Translation* ([Coppola, 2003](#)). This film was not listed on IMDb as a comedy, but is described as a comedy on the DVD cover. Cross-checks with other online film databases confirmed that it is classified as a comedy. As it is a film in which the central male character grapples with issues of ageing and the end of a successful career, a decision was made to download its details from IMDb and include it in the set of films. Hence details from 1501 films were used in the initial screening.

IMDb includes a number of fields (pieces of information) with each download, of which the most critical were the title and synopsis. The IMDb data was stored in a Microsoft Word document for future reference. The same data was also loaded into Microsoft Excel, so that the initial processing of this large number of films could be guided by Excel formulae and macros, while allowing for the recording of the researcher's own decisions about inclusion or exclusion.

I created a list of age and ageing related keywords (including key phrases) to provide a guide when searching for age and ageing-related themes. I tabulated relevant keywords (see Table 1). The title of each film was automatically searched for the presence of each of the keywords. If a keyword was found, it was recorded with the film details. If no keyword was found, a blank was recorded. An identical process was conducted on the synopsis. The details of each film were reviewed, using the film's title and synopsis keyword as a guide, before a decision made about whether or not to include the film in the 'long list'.

Table 1: Age and ageing-related keywords

terminal illness	retiree
terminally ill	retired
senior citizen	grandma
past his prime	funeral
past her prime	elderly
grumpy old men	retire
younger woman	fading
nursing home	ageing
autumn years	Santa
middle-aged	older
grandmother	elder
grandfather	dying
retirement	aging
middle age	old
washed up	retiree
mid-life	veteran
age	geriatric

Some typical situations that arose during the review included:

- A film had an age or ageing-related keyword in the title and/or the synopsis and was included in the long list.
- A film had a blank in both the title and the synopsis but was included in the long list based upon the researcher's knowledge of the film.
- A film had an age or ageing-related keyword in the title and/or the synopsis, but was excluded from the long list based upon the researcher's knowledge of the film and/or metadata available on the internet.

As the films were reviewed, the keyword list was modified to

- include additional age and ageing-related words missed from the original keyword list

- exclude false positives, e.g. situations where a word that initially appeared as age and ageing related was part of a larger word or phrase that was not age or ageing-related within the meaning of the study, e.g. three-year-old.

The IMDb storyline for each film that was identified as a likely candidate for the long list was downloaded (in early December 2012) and associated with the film in the Excel spreadsheet. The storyline was searched for age and ageing-related keywords. There were several iterations of the cycle: review / decide / update keyword list. Once the researcher's decision had been made, the long list consisted of approximately 100 films. The number of films on the long list was too extensive to bear close analysis so the list was re-examined to identify films that would make a 'short list'. Reasons for excising films from the long list included being belatedly identified a foreign language film such as *And What if we all Together* (2011) or a historical period piece such as the 1940s film, *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944). On closer scrutiny, some films had been included in the long list because of an age-related word in the title or synopsis (such as 'grandfather') but that character was not featured in the film in a significant way. For example, in *The Princess Bride* (1987), the synopsis contained the word 'grandfather' in a clause that stated 'as narrated by a kindly grandfather'. If there was uncertainty about whether to include a film or not, the promotional trailer was viewed via the IMDb website and a decision was based on that overview. The trailer usually uses a 'voice-over' to lead viewers through key aspects of a film without revealing the outcome.

The researcher then identified those films on the short list that had particular applicability to the chosen themes arising from the literature review and recorded the reasons for applicability. The final number of films selected for viewing, based on the criteria noted above, was 51. Table 2 sets out the long list of films.

Matrix of stereotypes cross referenced to films

In order to record, at a basic level, the way older people are represented in the films viewed, a matrix was developed listing the selected films on one axis and the agreed stereotypes of older people as described in the literature review on the other. The trailer for each film in the matrix was viewed by the researcher at least once. Where one of the stereotypes of older people was mentioned or featured, a 'yes' was put in the relevant box on the matrix. Brief notes of each film were made for reference.

Final cut

Films selected for inclusion in the final dataset were grouped into three themes, each of which addressed one of the research questions posed. The total number of films included in the data set was nine. The films finally chosen for analysis were selected because they appeared

to the researcher to be representative of comedy films featuring the selected themes. They also represented a balance of comedy classics and recent releases.

Table 2: Long list of films

10 (1979)	Larry Crowne (2011)
About Schmidt (2002)	Last Vegas (2013)
Arthur Christmas (2011)	Letters to Juliet (2010)
Beginners (2010)	Lost in Translation (2003)
Big Momma's House (2000)	Mary and Max (2009)
Christmas Vacation (1989)	Meet the Fockers (2004)
City Slickers (1991)	Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day (2008)
Charlie and Boots (2010)	Nobody's Fool (1994)
Crazy, Stupid, Love. (2011)	Old Dogs (2009)
Death at a Funeral (2007)	Old School (2003)
Driving Miss Daisy (1989)	Quartet (2012)
Eight Crazy Nights (2002)	Red (2010)
Father of the Bride Part II (1995)	Shrek Forever After (2010)
Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)	Sideways (2004)
Ghost World (2001)	Something's Gotta Give (2003)
Grandma's Boy (2006)	Stand Up Guys (2012)
Grown Ups (2010)	Step Brothers (2008)
Grumpy Old Men (1993)	The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2011)
Happy Gilmore (1996)	The Bucket List (2007)
Harold and Maude (1971)	The Graduate (1967)
Hope Springs (2012)	The Guard (2011)
I Could Never Be Your Woman (2007)	The Ladykillers (2004)
In Good Company (2004)	The Wedding Singer (1998)
In Her Shoes (2005)	Up (2009)
It's Complicated (2009)	Wild Hogs (2007)
Jack (1996)	

Research question 1: How are age and ageing represented in comedy film?

I selected two films for analysis in response to the first research question, which is concerned with broad themes of age and ageing. The films selected were *Charlie and Boots* ([Murphy, 2009](#)) and *Up* ([Docter & Peterson, 2009](#)) and they are outlined in Table 3. I chose *Charlie and Boots* because it is an Australian film. It stars Paul Hogan who is an iconic figure in Australian comedic history, having successfully transitioned from television to the 'big screen' with the popular *Crocodile Dundee* ([Faiman, 1986](#)). This film was an unexpected world-wide box-office success and this popularity was also reflected in video sales [NB: DVDs were not widely available until mid-1990s] ([O'Regan, 1988](#)). Paul Hogan played the hero Mick 'Crocodile' Dundee as a laconic bushman, equally unfazed by wild animals and the violence of New York. He represented an Australian stereotype to a world unfamiliar with the reality of the Australian bush. His oft-quoted line to a would-be mugger, 'That's not a knife. That's a knife!' cried out to audiences that Australians were a tough breed not to be messed with. I was interested to find out nearly 25 years later, Paul Hogan would represent an elderly Australian man in *Charlie and Boots*.

The second film I chose for the study was *Up*. This film had a similar theme to *Charlie and Boots* in that both films were concerned with journeys of widowers. *Up*, however, is a Disney/Pixar animated production and its target audience is children and families. It is unusual for such films to have a 78-year-old hero and, given the previously discussed susceptibility of children to stereotyping, I was interested to critically-analyse how this character would be represented.

Table 3: Films featuring issues of age and ageing

Film	Brief synopsis	Reasons for inclusion
Up (2009)	Carl Fredricksen is a 78-year-old widower who becomes reclusive following the death of his wife. He sets out on a fantastic journey to find the hero of his childhood only to discover that a stowaway - an eight-year-old boy scout - is sharing his adventure.	There are many stereotypes of ageing plus some aspects of ageing which resist usual stereotyping.
Charlie and Boots (2009)	Charlie is a Victorian dairy farmer in his late 60s who has been widowed by the unexpected death of his wife. He is withdrawn and depressed until he is tricked into going on a long-promised road trip with his son. The road trip proves to be cathartic and leads to reconciliation and understanding.	This film was included because it demonstrates resilience in ageing. Though he is depressed and grief stricken at the beginning of the film, the principal older character, Charlie, resists some of the common stereotypes of ageing.

The Charlie and Boots study was written up as a paper and submitted for consideration to *InMedia*. The paper is currently undergoing the peer review process. The paper is found in Chapter 4 of the thesis.

Research question 2: How are issues relating to middle age represented in comedy film?

Three films concerning middle-aged people were analysed. They are set out in Table 4. Films about middle age usually concern characters that are experiencing a crisis or anxiety because they feel that they are at the point where youth is behind them. There is a paucity of literature on comedy films concerned with the theme of fear and/or denial of ageing.

Table 4: Films related to mid-life crisis

Film	Brief synopsis	Reasons for inclusion
<i>Wild Hogs</i> (2009)	Four middle aged friends go on a road trip and unwittingly start a feud between themselves and a biker gang.	This film typifies male mid-life crisis issues and contains elements such as rebelling against constraints of work, wife and family, seeking thrills tinged with danger, such as motor bike riding, and going on a road trip in search of freedom and adventure.
<i>Lost in Translation</i> (2003)	The central character in this film, set in Japan, is a jaded middle-aged actor whose career is reduced to starring in a whisky advert.	The middle age of former action-movie star is explored. The film is subtle and understated in its representation of mid-life crisis.
<i>Something's Gotta Give</i> (2003)	Harry, a 60-year-old bachelor with a distinct preference for girlfriends under 30, finds himself drawn to an attractive, intelligent woman of his own generation.	This film was chosen because it explores how issues of middle-age are often different for men and women. It illustrates how ageism affects women at an earlier age than men, potentially leading to difficulties in building romantic or sexual relationships after separation, divorce or widowhood.

Research question 3: How is the sexuality of older adults represented in comedy film?

The third data set (Table 5) comprises four films in which I identified that issues related to sexuality and sexual relationships of older people were significant aspects of the film. Sexuality of older people is largely taboo in film and the implications for this are largely unexplored. In reality, as opposed to on-screen, it is accepted that humans remain sexually-active for most, if not all, of their adult lives ([Gledhill, 2011](#)). Closer analysis of the language

and images of representations of older adult sexuality shows a disparity between screen representation and real life experience.

Table 5: Films featuring sexuality of old people

Film	Brief synopsis	Reasons for inclusion
<i>Grumpy Old Men</i> (1993)	This film, which signals the characteristics of the two main characters in the title, also features attraction that the two men feel for a free spirited new neighbour.	This is a comedy classic in which older men are represented as having a keen interest in intimacy and sex. The 94 year-old father of one of the men is represented as still possessing a strong sex drive.
<i>Beginners</i> (2010)	A man in his late 70s reveals his homosexuality after his wife dies. In the last years of his life he pursues the gay lifestyle that he always yearned for.	I selected this film because, unusually, it features an older person in a homosexual relationship. It has been noted that older gay and lesbian people are virtually invisible in the community (Heaphy, Yip, & Thompson, 2004).
<i>The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel</i> (2012)	The DVD cover summation of this retirement odyssey is that ‘life and love can begin again when you embrace today and let go of the past’. The love the British retirees find in India includes a woman discovering that the object of her affection is gay and looking for his former lover. Another woman is lonely and hoping to find a wealthy partner and one of the men finds himself attracted to a widow 15 years older than himself.	This film was included because it depicts heterosexual and homosexual relationships held by older people. There are multiple stereotypes represented both positive and negative.
<i>Hope Springs</i> (2012)	The central theme of <i>Hope Springs</i> is loss of intimacy in the marriage of a couple in their 60s.	Several reviewers describe their embarrassment and discomfort at scenes where the couple’s sex life is discussed with a therapist. This reaction alone justifies inclusion of this film in the study. Within the film the discourse of ageing and sexuality is explored in a comedic

Film	Brief synopsis	Reasons for inclusion
		way but also raises the question of whether it is usual, normal even, for intimacy to cease to be important as people age.

Cross-over of themes

Films about mid-life crises often centre on characters' fear of ageing and the consequent denial that they are becoming older. Film characters that are affected by a 'mid-life crisis' look back to their youth and their young adulthood rather looking than forward to their future as 'seniors' or 'old age pensioners' or 'retirees'. Aspects of ageing are usually represented as being unappealing. The discourse of humour around ageing concentrates on loss – hair, teeth, physique and libido. It is this prospect of an unattractive and sexless old age that precipitates a sense of panic and rebellion in victims of mid-life crisis. Films that include sexually-active ageing could be an antidote to at least one of the dreaded stereotypes of ageing – being sexless. An older person being described as 'sexless' has two implications: the most obvious is that the older person is not sexually-active. Another implication is that older people are neither like a man or a woman; they are simply 'old'.

Because issues to do with ageing, including 'mid-life crisis' and so-called 'senior sexuality', span the 40-plus-year period during which ageing is often represented as being problematic, the span was split into middle age (45-65 years) and old age (65 years onwards). There was occasional cross-over of themes between the two defined age cohorts. For example, sexuality is comically-problematic in a film concerned with mid-life. Findings on representations of middle age in comedy film and representations of older peoples' sexuality have been written up as papers and can be found at chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

Data analysis

When I critically-analysed the data in each film, I set up a lap top with DVD drive and connected it to a second screen and keyboard. This facilitated watching a scene from a film on one screen while documenting findings on the other. Each film was watched multiple times to gain a broad overview of themes. Short descriptive notes were made. In each film, key scenes were selected for closer scrutiny based on whether or not elements of the discourse of age and ageing were present. The matrix of stereotypes was used as a guide. The films were viewed with the subtitles feature activated so that no dialogue was missed. Where the director's

commentary was available, it was accessed to give an insight into any decision-making in the film's production that was relevant to representations of age and ageing. Where available, the screenplay for the selected films was downloaded from one of the many free film script websites. When a scene was selected for close analysis, the Rotten Tomatoes ([Rotten Tomatoes](#)) and IMDb on-line film review databases were checked for pertinent commentary posted by professional and audience critics.

Chapter summary

This chapter described the CDA methodology and the methods I used to critically evaluate how age and ageing is represented in a sample of comedy films. I explained why I chose CDA and dispositive analysis to undertake the study and I provided a brief description of the diverse approaches to CDA. A more detailed explanation and rationale was given for the specific approach I chose for this study – dispositive analysis. I described the method I used to select the data set and the rationale for my choice. I provided a short synopsis of the films and linked the selected films to the three research questions.

In chapter 4, the findings from analysis of the films, *Up* ([Docter & Peterson, 2009](#)) and *Charlie and Boots* ([Murphy, 2009](#)), have been written up as a paper that is currently under review by the journal, *InMedia*. The paper responds to the first research question: How are age and ageing represented in comedy film?

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS: HOW ARE AGE AND AGEING REPRESENTED IN COMEDY FILM?

Introduction

In this study, the first research question I sought to answer was, ‘how are older people and the ageing process presented to audience in comedy film?’. In response to this question, Chapter 4 examines two comedy films, *Up* ([Docter & Peterson, 2009](#)) and *Charlie and Boots* ([Murphy, 2009](#)), using a dispositive frame. Findings are presented in the form of a paper currently under review with *InMedia*. My co-author and I confined our data analysis to two films because we wanted to look broadly at the discourse that surrounds the older characters in the selected films; a larger sample would have made the task unwieldy. As explained fully in the paper itself, the chosen films come from two different sub-genres of comedy films. *Up* is a children’s animation and *Charlie and Boots* is an Australian film featuring a distinctly Australian slant on humour. Australian humour is laconic, self-deprecatory and often ‘black’ ([Australian Government, 2007](#)). The Australian film industry is supported and funded to some extent by the government. (In the case of the film in question, the New South Wales Government contributed funds through Screen NSW). We were particularly interested to find out how older characters would be treated in a production which receives funds from the same coffers that legislate against ageism.

Name of paper	Author 1		Author 2		Status
Not so funny: representations of age and ageing in comedy film	Margaret Gatling	80%	Prof Colin Holmes	20%	Submitted to <i>InMedia</i>

Not so funny: a consideration of the discourse of age and ageing in *Up* and *Charlie and Boots*

Ageism and the cinema

Ageism is characteristically associated with both subtle and overt attitudes, relationships, discourses and policies which portray or describe older people in stereotypical ways that demean and marginalise them collectively, and as individuals ([Rozanova, Northcott, & McDaniel, 2006](#)). First named by the gerontologist Robert Butler, the term ‘ageism’ has attracted a host of explanatory and descriptive models ([Butler, 1969](#)). [J. E. Thornton \(2002\)](#), for example, explains it in terms of cultural mythology, noting that the language of stereotypes draws on ‘embodied categories, concepts and frames’, and suggesting that ‘the mind is a stereotype generator’ ([p.307](#)). He warns that we should be especially cautious about the language used to describe ageing and older people, but concludes that ageist stereotypes are ‘straw men’ crafted from societal fears and misconceptions, yet deliberately created in terms that can be easily refuted as ‘the idea that should be rejected’ ([p.304](#)) and thus creating a realistic goal for research.

[J. E. Thornton \(2002\)](#) acknowledges ageist stereotypes not only ‘influence the attitudes of others toward generalized older people or to anyone perceived to be old and aging’ ([p.304](#)) but also serve to shape the expectations that people have of ageing, thereby establishing a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ ([p.304](#)) – a view that surfaces in many publications on ageing. Emphasizing the impact of social processes, [Overall \(2006\)](#) claims that ‘the rate at which one ages, how one ages, and the ways in which aging persons are regarded and regard themselves are accepted as being at least partly socially generated’ ([p.127](#)). [Minichiello et al. \(2000\)](#) found that ageism promotes feelings of alienation, marginalisation and frustration amongst older Australians and can adversely affect the health of older people. Unremitting negative media images, coupled with social isolation fuelled by ageist attitudes, are likely to impact on mental health and contribute to depression and anxiety among older people. Physical health may also be affected. [Sarkisian et al. \(2005\)](#), for example, found that negative stereotyping may lead older adults to reduce their level of exercise, thereby reducing general health status. [Levy et al. \(2006\)](#) found that ageist stereotyping may indirectly lead to hearing loss because older people do not seek professional assistance to treat a hearing deficit, assuming it is inevitable. These studies suggest that if older people perceive themselves as deficient in an area because it is a commonly-held societal belief that they should be, the deficiency may become a reality: the myth thus constitutes, as Thornton suggested, a potentially self-fulfilling prophecy.

Since [Butler \(1969\)](#) first defined ageism, a review of published research reveals ageism continues to be perpetuated and enlarged by film and television imagery. Older people continue to be under-represented and are often portrayed negatively. The media remains firmly attached to the stereotypical imagery of walking sticks, stooped posture and the forgetful and eccentric old ‘codger’ or ‘geezer’. The exploration of filmic representations of subjects related to health, such as disability, smoking, obesity, birthing and ageing, has long been considered a legitimate topic for research among health professionals, principally because those depictions may directly influence the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of audiences and thus members of a community. [Dalton et al. \(2003\)](#), for example, found that depictions of smoking in movies influenced the initiation of smoking among adolescents, a matter of concern in the consideration of findings reported by [Eslick and Eslick \(2009\)](#), which revealed high rates of depictions of smoking in *The Simpsons* television programme. Similarly, there is a vast body of research on the negative influence that depictions of violence have on viewers, especially children ([Anderson, 2004](#); [Anderson et al., 2003](#); [Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004](#); [Wilson et al., 2002](#)). Theories attempting to explain these effects largely employ socio-cognitive models, which derive both from research on interactions with real people and situations, as well as encounters with fictitious characters and scenarios ([Anderson et al., 2003](#)).

Film is one of the forces that construct the way societies and their members view themselves, but it does not accurately reflect the realities of society. Our literature review reveals that the reflection of ageing delivered by films is a distorted image with a bias towards youth, which results in younger people being depicted more favourably than older people, and an absence, or at least reduced presence, of older people. The cinematic depiction of older people as a prematurely-dying minority is in direct opposition to the facts: people are actually living longer and the proportion of older people in society is dramatically increasing. In Australia, for example, it is predicted that by 2056 approximately 25 per cent of the population will be aged 65 or over ([ABS, 2008](#)).

This degree of media misrepresentation is unjust and detrimental to individuals and the community, especially since it is also associated with an absence of positive images. Several stereotypical images of ageing have been described in the literature, and researchers often use the same set of associated descriptors ([Hummert et al., 1994](#); [Magoffin, 2007](#); [Schmidt & Boland, 1986](#)). The stereotypes may embody generally positive elements (Table 6) or negative elements (Table 7).

Table 6: Positive stereotypes of older people

Golden ager	Perfect grandparent	John Wayne conservative
Active, adventurous, healthy, well-travelled	Intelligent, kind, loving, family-oriented	Patriotic, nostalgic, religious, tough, proud, wealthy

Table 7: Negative stereotypes of older people

Shrew / curmudgeon	Despondent	Severely-impaired	Recluse
Greedy, complaining, inflexible, nosy	Lonely, neglected, sad, tired, fragile	Senile, slow-moving and thinking, sick, sexless, feeble	Quiet, timid, dependant, forgetful

Ageism is widespread in all sections of society and health professionals, including nurses, are unfortunately not immune from being either the victims of ageism or absorbing ageist attitudes which may adversely affect the quality of care they provide. Evidence of ageism in nursing is substantial and long-standing ([Davis, 2009](#); [Gething et al., 2002](#); [Higgins et al., 2007](#)). This represents a double blow for the elderly if ageism has caused them to suffer health problems *and* the people caring for them hold ageist views. It is acknowledged that a range of influences affect the views of health professionals, including personal experiences, but we focus here on just one possible factor: the representations of ageing and older people in popular comedy film. It is not suggested that health professionals are more, or less, prone than other viewers to being influenced by what they are exposed to in films, however negative attitudes to older people have been shown to be developing from childhood ([Robinson et al., 2007](#)). Health professionals may, therefore, have unwittingly absorbed prejudicial views over their childhood and teenage viewing years.

Comedy has been chosen not only because of our fondness for that genre, but also because it is the quintessential medium for expressing unacceptable, dangerous and offensive scenarios in ways that are more-or-less palatable. By making audiences laugh, comedy can disguise the unpalatable, dangerous and offensive, and lure viewers into accepting stereotypes. A study into audience perception of racial stereotyping in the popular comedy *Rush Hour 2* ([Ratner, 2001](#)) claimed that ‘viewers’ validation of racial stereotypes is the ideological effect of comedy that encourages them to perceive racial differences as essential and natural, not culturally constructed’ ([Park, Gabbadon, & Chernin, 2006, p.174](#)). We suggest that this effect can be extended to stereotyping of older people. In addition these representations work upon

what is already present in the audience, in this case a fear of getting old, a sense that the elderly are an emotional and economic burden, that they are physically unattractive, 'drag society down', and – in short – are 'a problem'. In order to expose and exploit these fears and prejudices, comedy often employs deconstructive devices, such as ridiculing norms through exaggeration, reversing expectations and assumed roles, creating incongruous juxtapositions, and using word-play. This casts discomfiting doubt on the certainties to which our sense of identity and knowledge of the world are anchored.

Since the early 1970s, there has been a substantial stream of empirical research on the representation of older people in the media, notably in newspapers, magazines, novels and television programmes. Film, particularly comedy film, has received rather less attention despite the powerful influence it is known to exert over attitudes and beliefs. This gap suggests that the topic of ageism may be marginalised and it is hoped that the present research study will be a small step towards putting it on the agenda of those interested in addressing sources of ageism by flagging the insidious contribution that media representations can have on personal and community attitudes.

Methodology

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to exposing how power, control, and domination are produced and perpetuated through discourse and discursive practices ([Fairclough, 1989](#); [Locke, 2004](#); [Wodak & Meyer, 2009](#)). CDA is not a method; it is an approach that embraces a variety of theories including linguistics, semiotics, film theory, critical literary theory, psychology, education theories and others. All forms of discourse and discursive practice can be selected for scrutiny including newspaper articles, political speeches, written texts, visual images and conversations. The particular CDA approach that guides this study is dispositive analysis. In the medium of film, dispositive analysis links three aspects of a discourse: what characters say; the actions that they are others perform; materialisations (things). To give an example of the three elements of dispositive analysis in practice when analysing a comedy film: if a character is called 'an old codger', makes frequent trips to urinate and uses a walking frame, the three elements of the 'dispositive' come together to form a representation of ageing.

Cultural hegemony is a crucial concept to understand when thinking about how the discourse around topics becomes knowledge. The term was developed by Gramsci ([in Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971](#)) to describe one of the ways that those with power of a discourse hold sway over those who do not. How a discourse develops around a particular topic is the result of many influences, the foremost of which is the media. What we read in newspapers, what we view on television and in films, and what we hear in political speeches contribute to the

formation of opinions. Opinions become what is accepted by the opinion-holder to be true – what is for that person to be ‘knowledge’. In this way, the media contribute to our ‘knowledge’. Ageism develops through similar pathways. How Western society views ageing is shaped by a host of influences or agents including governments, healthcare agencies, the ‘beauty industry’, producers of consumer goods and the media. It is the medium of film which is the focal point for this paper.

Filmmakers have power over how films are made and what viewpoint is privileged. These professionals are driven by creative instinct, tempered by financial constraints. Unless a film makes a decent box-office return the reputation of the studio, director and actors is compromised. Therefore it is not unsurprising that, in mainstream cinema at least, tried and tested ways of making audiences laugh such as slapstick, hyperbole and stereotyping are frequent devices for humour. Where older characters are involved, supposed universal characteristics of ageing including forgetfulness, incontinence, immobility and inflexibility are often employed for humorous effect. There is a circularity whereby audiences are served up images of ageing with which they are familiar and therefore they laugh. Getting laughs is the purpose of comedy therefore representations which have been found historically to be amusing are repeated. CDA can be used to expose and examine ageism, which permeates the discourse of age and ageing in the genre of comedy film. Language, actions, objects such as costumes, filmic devices and the use of stereotypes can all be decoded to reveal underlying hegemony and power structures which privilege youth and depict the ageing process as a journey towards decrepitude and the grave.

The films selected for illustrating a CDA approach to evaluating comedic representations of age and ageing are the animated film, *Up* ([Docter & Peterson, 2009](#)), and the live action film, *Charlie and Boots* ([Murphy, 2009](#)). Both films lend themselves to dispositive analysis because of the combination of language, actions and objects that jointly-convey representations of age and ageing.

The ups and downs of *Up*

The animation film *Up* released by Disney Pixar in 2009 has proved to be a huge financial success, with box office sales of \$500 million in the first five months following release. It is typical of a new genre of animation films, which increasingly ‘cross over’ or transcend the traditional distinction between cartoons, intended for children, and comedy dramas intended for adults, and attempt to convey powerful messages for viewers of all ages. (Other examples are *Toy Story* (1995), *Finding Nemo* (2003), and *Happy Feet* (2006)). These three films explore concepts relevant to all generations such as friendship, loyalty and personal identity.) Disney cartoons have often been the subject of analysis because of their popularity

with children of successive generations and the consequent position of the Disney Studio as a dominant force in American culture ([Boje, 1995](#); [Brockus, 2004](#); [Robinson et al., 2007](#)).

While *Up* is superficially a children's comedy film, like most Disney offerings it reflects a recognition that adults accompany children to the cinema and purchase DVDs and other film-related merchandise for children. Disney films provide a 'mediatory space where generations of people may join together and revel in their shared interests' ([Brockus, 2004, p.192](#)), therefore the premise, plot and language of Disney films are designed to appeal to both adults and children.

Up depicts ageing and older people in ways that can readily be unpacked to reveal mix of positive and negative images. Its hero, 78 year old retired balloon salesman, Carl Frederickson, is devastated and depressed following the death of his wife, Ellie, and retreats into a solitary and grumpy existence in their marital home before setting off to pursue the grand adventure that he and Ellie had spent a lifetime planning. The couple were childless, further reinforcing Carl's isolation, and there is increasing pressure from developers to sell the family home to make way for high rise buildings. The opening scenes of the film take the viewer through Carl's life, from a chubby child obsessed with the daring exploits of Charles Muntz, a handsome explorer who brings back amazing treasures from exotic places, to the cinematic present where he is an elderly, grief-stricken widower, mourning the loss of his life partner. In the first part of the film, Carl and Ellie's married life tumbles along, unfolding a mixture of joy and sadness, which may be mystifying for some younger viewers but will resonate with many adults. Carl's life is laid bare, with the joy of his wedding, the sadness of infertility, and the repeated financial setbacks that prevented the long planned for trip to Paradise Falls in the footsteps of their hero, Charles Muntz. Finally, almost on the eve of departure for the long anticipated trip, Ellie falls ill and dies.

There is no spoken narration during these scenes. Understanding what is happening to the couple is dependent on a viewer's recognition and comprehension of the actions and signs that point to twists and turns in the plot. For example, the couple's inability to have children is signposted by a sequence where clouds assume the shape of a baby, then the couple start to prepare a nursery and, finally, they are in a doctor's rooms, a place where good and bad news is dispensed; Ellie's downcast look and slumped form convey disappointment and sadness. We look at this final scene from a distance through a doorway, indicating that it is a very private moment.

In its depiction of ageing, the makers of *Up* vacillate between commonly-used stereotypes and unexpected, sometimes entirely fantastic images. Carl is bad tempered, hearing-impaired, arthritic, weak-bladdered, intolerant of youth and living in the past. Yet, at times, he

is also depicted as possessing dogged determination, a remarkable capacity for change, incredible inventiveness and superhuman strength. He has to descend his staircase by means of a mechanical device, but at one point, he is shown climbing up the side of an airship and effecting daring high-speed escapes. At times there is a blurring of the two conflicting images, and in a fight scene where Carl uses his walking cane to have a swordfight with Muntz, his identity as a 'super-septuagenarian' suddenly transmutes into an 'osteopathic old man' and back again. As the combatants raise their weapons they are both frozen momentarily, transfixed by arthritis. It is a 'bone-jarring' reminder that we are watching a fantasy in which a 78-year-old is duelling with a centenarian. It as if the filmmaker suddenly stops in his tracks, and decides that the audience need to be reminded that these men are old, that they must be frail and could not actually do this, and so the film must recall the stereotype. These scenes where it is difficult to decide whether the two elderly protagonists are fit or feeble illustrates the tensions that comedy filmmakers face when attempting to represent older characters. In *Up* the opposing depictions of strength and agility on one hand, and frailty and stiffness on the other stimulate the viewer to ponder that we all live somewhere along the weak/strong continuum. Some older people may be weaker than younger people, some may not. Frequently depicting older people as requiring walking sticks and being hunched and frail is an example of a filmmaker's reliance on stereotyping and, in the face of the vastly differing health status of 'older' people, is not logical.

Carl's life before his wife's death has setbacks and sadness but these are mitigated by the strength of their relationship and the joy they have in each other's company. Viewers are therefore unprepared for his swift decline from fun-loving husband to melancholy recluse. His appearance changes subtly, so that his mouth points down at the corners, his shoulders are hunched and his face is permanently scowling: he becomes decidedly unlovable. As *Empire Magazine* so eloquently put it: 'No doubt the Disney merchandising people crapped themselves at the prospect, [of trying to sell *Up* merchandise] because how do you get kids to ask for a geriatric Carl action figure at Christmas?' ([Adams, 2009](#)). It appears that it was adults who harboured feelings of anxiety in relation to images of ageing, doubting that there could be any appeal for children in an action hero who manages to use thousands of balloons, iconic symbols of childhood, to liberate himself from an oppressive world that is closing in on him and run away to join the circus, or in this case, float away to find a fabulous waterfall.

Totally absent from Carl's life is a support network. With the death of his partner and without any children, he is on his own. He resists change, obstinately refusing to sell his house despite it being marooned in a sea of high rise developments, thus affirming the view that one's sense of self is intimately connected to one's possessions and the physical space called 'home'. Personal identity and sense of place are mutually dependent, and just as Carl's house has become an anachronism, standing alone against the irresistible march of 'progress', so Carl

himself is at odds with, and resists, the changing world around him. His desire to preserve his own sense of self is demonstrated by his repeated use of the word 'no', as an expression of self-determination, to the point that it becomes a symbol of personal resistance. Will he sell his house? – 'No!' Will he let the young workman fix his mail box? – 'No!' Can the young adventure scout help him across the street? ... across the yard? ... across the porch? 'No! No! No!'. 'No' is emblematic of Carl's control over his own destiny and, although he may be in decline and his life appears aimless and depressing, he is exerting his right to live as he wants.

His resistance extends to the protection of Ellie's identity, insisting that photos, chairs, and other objects must remain in their fixed places just as Ellie left them, effectively preserving a shrine symbolic of her continuing existence in his heart and mind. Indeed, Carl 'sees' or retains memories of Ellie in certain objects and protects them with a fierce, apparently unreasonable passion. One such object is the mailbox, which they constructed together and marked with their handprints and Carl has elevated her handprint to the status of a religious relic. When the box is accidentally damaged, a construction worker offers to fix it but, in carelessly laying his hand on the box, he is interfering with what has become sacred, symbolically violating what for Carl is tangible proof that his wife existed – her handprint. This face-to-face confrontation between what appears to be the stubborn obsession of old age and the well-meaning but gauche impulsiveness of youth, results in a momentary loss of control and Carl hits the young man across the head. While an attachment to objects that remind him of his sorely-missed wife is not unexpected, his violent response to an offer of assistance is excessive. What follows is a swift fall from self-determination to compulsory removal to an aged care facility, thus potentially creating in the minds of younger viewers a link between ageing, bad-temper, violence and nursing homes as places of punishment. In this film, the nursing home is depicted as a human rubbish tip, where the unwanted of society are unceremoniously dumped.

The two men who come to transport Carl to the retirement home are nurses, their distinctive blue 'scrubs' readily recognisable to audiences from a host of popular American television series. They arrive at his house in a pack, with their trappings of power and authority – uniforms and name badges, patronising manner and demeaning comments – in order to exercise power over the new arrival. They greet Carl with condescension and when he says he needs to go inside his house for a minute, they surmise it is because he has to go to the bathroom, and a sniggering comment is passed between them: 'Yeah, for about the 80th time today'. Since Carl has very little interaction with his fellow human beings in the film, this unpleasant encounter with the 'caring' profession stands out and the language and behaviour is a matter of concern. This scene links the spoken discourse of the nurses with their actions of sniggering and mocking. The materialisations of power manifest in the nurses' uniforms to provide a representation of ageing as being about powerlessness in the face of authority.

It is left to eight-year-old Russell, the ‘Wilderness Explorer’ who only needs the ‘Assisting the Elderly’ badge to qualify as a ‘Senior Wilderness Explorer’, to be impressed by Carl’s interesting belongings, recognise and defer to his knowledge, and share in his adventure instead of thwarting it. Including ‘assistance to the elderly’ in the portfolio of Wilderness Explorers, however, suggests to audiences that older people are more likely than others to go missing or get into difficulties when out in the countryside and that they are a special group, existing outside mainstream society. This contributes to their marginalisation.

Up to this point in the film, Carl conforms to nearly all the identified negative stereotypes of ageing listed in Table 7 but he is unwilling to transfer from a prison of his own making to a prison chosen for him by others. This proves to be the impetus he needs to pursue his quest for adventure, which he enters upon with Russell as his companion. This capacity for change and thirst for adventure matches with the positive stereotype of ageing labelled as ‘Golden Ager’ (shown in Table 6). His relationship with Russell evolves from grudging acceptance of an unwanted stowaway to a supportive, grandfatherly role, supplying the time and attention that Russell craves from his absent father. To his amazement, Carl comes to recognise characteristics in Russell that he had loved about Ellie: a sense of adventure, enthusiasm, perseverance and coincidentally a tendency to seal agreements with that mysterious, binding oath of childhood ‘cross your heart!’

A film’s musical soundtrack serves many functions and plays a crucial role in creating tension, heightening emotional responses and complementing the feelings characters are experiencing. To give just one example: *Up* includes the Habanera from Bizet’s *Carmen*, and as the music descends majestically down the scale, Carl is actually descending the stairs in his electric chairlift, an iconic object in the discourse of ageing. The chairlift momentarily jams and Carl has to thump it to continue his descent, parodying the possible stiffness and impaired movement of Carl himself. More significantly for the narrative of the film, however, the first verse of the Habanera is roughly translated into English as: *Love is a rebellious bird that nobody can tame, and you call him quite in vain if it suits him not to come*. This is emblematic of Carl’s rebellious spirit and foreshadows his refusal to live in a nursing home.

Many anomalies and absences in the film deserve discussion and await explanation in a further study. We should consider why there are no women, for example, except a dead wife and the young adventure scout’s abandoned mother, who appears briefly at the end of the film. What sense will children make of the message that Ellie left for Carl, that her greatest adventure was her life with him? How does *Up* manage the bricolage of the disheartening and the inspiring, which is so common in the everyday lives of older people? What sense can be made of the seamless juxtaposition of painful realism and sudden fantastic exaggeration that characterises the depiction of Carl’s existence? The storyline itself is rich in interpretive

possibilities: Carl's life could be viewed as a metaphor depicting the European Enlightenment, full of promise and confidence, moving through triumphs and disappointments, until the undermining of reason (Ellie was Carl's 'reason' for living) forces a rethink and a fantastic postmodern journey begins, complete with fractured logic, unresolved questions, and unexpected twists and turns, with an impulsive, childlike 'unreason' initially hiding as a stowaway and subsequently becoming a valued friend.

Charlie and Boots

Although the second film discussed in this paper presents a similar view of ageing, instead of being ostensibly for children, *Charlie and Boots* is aimed at an older audience, and has an 'M' rating (mature audiences) in Australia. Like *Up*, *Charlie and Boots* explores the grief of an ageing widower, Charlie (Paul Hogan): substitute Gracie (Peggy Thompson) for Ellie, and a dairy farm for the city, and the plots have striking parallels. Charlie's wife dies suddenly, leaving him bereft and without focus; he withdraws from the world, leaving meals uneaten and retreats to the couch, blinds down, with only the television for solace. The film's website describes Charlie as a *feisty old curmudgeon*, neatly allocating him to one of the negative stereotype groups recognised in the literature (Please refer to Table 7). He is in his late 60s, some 10 years younger than Carl from *Up*, and does not display the same physical infirmities, but it is hinted that his mental health is suffering following the death of his wife. His son, Boots (Shane Jacobson), finds a bottle of pills in a cupboard which causes him some consternation and thus the audience is made aware that Charlie's doctor has provided a pharmaceutical band-aid for his psychological wounds. Apathy, withdrawal, hopelessness and melancholy appear to have engulfed him and, like Carl, there is no way out until an agent for change appears in the form of a younger person: Carl has Russell and Charlie has Boots.

The difference between the attitudes of Russell and Boots toward older people is noteworthy. Whereas Russell never refers negatively to Carl's age and appears to instinctively respect and defer to his knowledge, Boots is much more critical, frequently mentioning his father's age, either directly or obliquely. In *Up*, Russell is an uninvited traveller in Carl's break for adventure, whereas in *Charlie and Boots*, it is Boots who forces change and adventure on the older man. Indeed, there appears to be a role reversal, with Boots taking over the parenting role, adopting a 'son knows best' attitude, and removing Charlie from his dreary isolation against his will.

Charlie oscillates between grumpiness and mischievousness, often leaving Boots speechless at the sheer audacity of his father's practical jokes. This positive quality is not mentioned in the groups of stereotypes noted above, but could be viewed in contradistinction to the 'timid' stereotype and listed as 'fearless/outspoken'. Older people, with their years of

experience in managing life's difficulties, and perhaps under the influence of reduced inhibition and less fear of retribution, often feel more confident to criticise or challenge. When Charlie and Boots' car almost collides with a car full of older women for example, Boots' abject apology and nervous explanations are in stark contrast to Charlie's shouts of uninhibited criticism, insults and wisecracks in the background.

Older women fare badly in *Charlie and Boots*. While not invisible, as in *Up*, it is difficult to identify a strong positive role model for ageing women. Even the beloved dead Gracie turns out to be doubly-flawed. In a scene where both men are forced to be patient while a goods train lumbers past over a crossing, secrets are revealed both to each other and to the audience. Charlie reveals to Boots that he is convinced that Gracie had an affair with the local headmaster when she was younger and, shockingly, Boots reveals to the audience that his own young son drowned whilst in the care of his grandmother, thus problematising the 'perfect grandparent' stereotype. Prior to these revelations, Gracie is portrayed as a reliable matriarch, keeping her family enthralled with her boundless energy, humour, enthusiasm and love, but these sudden revelations tarnish her standing and she is only partially redeemed by Charlie's assertion that she cried every night over the death of her grandson. Other older women in the film are variously portrayed as being domineering, bossy, oversexed or prudish. There are also numerous, nameless older women who fuss around after Gracie's funeral, attending to the housekeeping and later providing Charlie with meals that he discards, un-tasted, adding to his growing collection of uneaten dinners. None of the women offers her company to break his loneliness, although similarly to the doctor offering a pharmaceutical panacea for Charlie's grief, they do attempt to soothe him with soup and lift his spirits with casseroles. This attention to the body rather than the 'soul' shows older women in an unfavourable light, as being superficial and shying away from the difficult issue of grief. This view of older women is in stark contrast with the depiction of the young female hitch-hiker, Jess (Morgan Griffin), whose pretty face and sweet demeanour win over both father and son.

Charlie and Boots is a 'road movie', the action largely taking place during a journey. Like many road movies the journey is allegorical and, in this case, the most meaningful journey being taken is the progress that Charlie makes in coming to deal with the loss of his wife. At least two other journeys are also being made: the difficult pathway that father and son must take in mending their fractured relationship, and Boots' tortured progress toward acknowledging that he blames his mother for the death of his son.

The comedy in the film is largely generated by the contrasting personalities of father and son: namely, the larrikin father taunting his more reserved and conservative son. The role reversal that began at the start of the film, with Boots taking charge over his father, gathers momentum as the film progresses and the behavioural expectations of older and younger

generations are thereby explicitly challenged. As Charlie begins to emerge from his cocoon of grief he is revealed as an uninhibited practical joker, his victim often being the hapless Boots, whom Charlie exposes to embarrassment and danger in a way that is unusual in a parent/child relationship.

In terms of images of older people in film, the actor Paul Hogan seems a wise choice for the role of Charlie. Well-known for his portrayal some 25 years ago of the iconic bushman, Crocodile Dundee, Hogan almost reprises here the same type of character. His naturally laconic way of speaking, his bronzed complexion and golden hair, and his well-known mischievousness and outspokenness, constitute an 'idealised' image, but one widely considered typical of Australian men from the country. At nearly 70 years of age, like Hogan himself, Charlie refuses to fit comfortably into any identifiable aged stereotype. While initially appearing as despondent, lonely, reclusive and fragile, he later appears as feisty and daring. His face is lined and craggy yet he is fit enough to outrun a bull and jump a fence. Charlie is not represented as sexless or asexual – he attracts the attention of at least two women on the road trip and, although he rejects both of them, this device illustrates that both men and women have the capacity to flirt and demonstrate sexuality in later life. *Charlie and Boots* thus presents a picture of ageing that largely cuts across and resists the familiar stereotypes populating the discourse of ageing. Charlie is mature in years but often immature and boyish in his behaviour; he is lean and fit, but has a passion for fried junk food; he is cantankerous, yet kind hearted; he is an unwilling tourist, who dares to fly in a poorly serviced relic of a plane. He resists stereotyping, and in doing so makes a mockery of attempts to write off people over a 'certain age' as useless objects of derision.

Conclusion

Films, in particular comedies, have an insidious way of portraying minorities and other vulnerable groups in unflattering and risible ways. In this paper, we have outlined and suggested ways in which the cloak of comedy can be used to disguise messages about the nature of ageing and older people, and thereby contribute to the development of societal and individual attitudes. Popular film is a significant element in the vast array of cultural media influencing attitude formation but, unlike its impact on the development of aggression, its contribution to ageism has not attracted detailed analysis. Representations of ageing in two popular films have been briefly examined using an approach of dispositive analysis. Both films portray ageing widowers struggling with grief, mired in self-pity and displaying to the world a cantankerous, belligerent exterior which disguises a wounded and vulnerable soul. Each displays some of the usual stereotypical 'comical' accessories of ageing, such as walking sticks, stooped posture, and hearing aids, particularly in the Disney film *Up*, but the plots of both films develop to reveal

positive characteristics and qualities which may also be stereotypical of ageing but are not frequently acknowledged because they are less humorous, namely doggedness, loyalty and wisdom. Other interesting insights, which may not be so well acknowledged, also emerge such as surprising agility, the ability to attract admiration from the opposite sex, playfulness, and a keen sense of adventure.

To unpack and display the multiple interpretations of images of ageing in film is a step toward understanding and managing the feelings of aversion, resentment, superiority, pity and the myriad other emotions which manifest themselves in society as ageism. A critical approach to the discourse of ageing underwrites an interpretive freedom in the analysis of film, which can yield interesting and surprising insights into their potential influence on attitudes to ageing and older people.

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End of manuscript

Chapter summary

This chapter demonstrated how the discourse of age and ageing can be revealed in comedy films. Negative and positive stereotyping is apparent in recent films. The children's film, *Up*, has a strong reliance on negative stereotyping of older people. Carl, the elderly hero of *Up* is grumpy and short-tempered. Initially, at least, he is particularly unfriendly to a small boy scout. Although adults may recognise that his prickly demeanour masks deep unresolved grief, children might not have yet developed the insight to discern this in him. In *Charlie and Boots*, generally positive stereotyping of the older character, Charlie, shows him to be tough, proud and relatively-wealthy. However, both films show the older characters as vulnerable and grief-stricken, as death of a long term partner robs both men of companionship and support.

The following chapter presents an analysis of three films relating to middle age. The films were examined to discern how this period of life is represented and to answer the second research question, 'How is middle age represented in comedy films?'. The middle-aged characters in the chosen films are also vulnerable – not because they are elderly, frail, or grief-stricken but because they are susceptible to anxieties related to being no longer 'young'-anxieties fed by Western society's obsession with youth and beauty.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS: HOW IS MIDDLE AGE REPRESENTED IN COMEDY FILM?

Introduction

The second research question in this study was, ‘how is middle age presented to comedy film audiences?’. My decision to include middle age when analysing the discourse surrounding age and ageing in comedy films came from an observation made following a literature review on the topic, that there are wide ranging views about the age at which a person is considered to be ‘old’. The extent to which opinions differ about the age range was reinforced at a conference I attended; one of the papers was about smoking cessation among ‘Greek-Australian elderly people aged 50 and over’. I realised that a researcher deeming the age of 50 to be elderly reflected the diversity of opinion about defining old age. I concluded that it would be appropriate to look at representations of ageing from an earlier point than that which I had first intended. I therefore included films about what is commonly considered to be middle age whilst acknowledging that some researchers might classify this as early old age. Three films were eventually selected for analysis to answer the second research question. A paper describing the method and findings is found below. The manuscript is currently under review at *The Qualitative Report*.

An often-repeated theme of middle age in comedy film is that it is a time of crisis. Middle age is shown as a time when negative commentary abounds in the talk and text. References are made constantly to middle age spread, grey hair and flabby arms. Middle-aged people in comedy films appear to be extremely vulnerable. They are sandwiched between a younger generation that, with youth on their side, appears exuberant, attractive and serves as a reminder of times gone by, and an older generation that is increasingly frail, dependent and - worst horror of all - one step nearer the grave. Another facet of middle age in comedy film is that all appears to be going well in the lives of the middle-aged characters until something triggers a consciousness of his/her ageing.

A 2012 study ([Levy, Slade, Murphy, & Gill](#)) gave some credence to the saying ‘you are only as young as you feel’. The 11-year study found that, when recovering from a disability or a debilitating health episode, older people who had a positive view of ageing fared better than those who believed in negative age stereotypes. Study respondents were asked to give the first five words that came to mind when asked to think of old people. Positive responses included ‘spry’ and a typical negative response was ‘decrepit’ ([Levy et al., 2012, p.1972](#)). In middle age, as represented in comedy film, a positive, or at least neutral outlook, is the norm

until ‘something happens’. That ‘thing’ is often the spark which ignites a midlife crisis and thus sets in motion an explosion of events, which is the plot of the film.

An example of something happening to spark a crisis in mid-life is demonstrated in one of the films that I considered but, ultimately, did not include: *Father of the Bride Part 2* ([Shyer, 1995](#)). The hero of this film, George Banks, is a middle-aged man (aged around 50). When the film opens he sees his life as one in transition not crisis. Rather than dreading the coming years, he is looking forward to a point in five years’ time when his youngest child will finish school. George sees new freedoms and opportunities opening up for him. What happens to disturb this idyll is age-related and brings into focus the semantic load that certain words carry. George’s daughter is pregnant and, although all those people around him are celebrating, he cannot come to terms with being a grandfather. The reason for this lies in the implications of the word. In western societies being called grandpa, granddad or pop does not just denote a relationship; it is also often used as term for any older man, regardless of whether he has grandchildren or not, and is used in a condescending or derogatory way. The *Dictionary of American Slang and Colloquial Expressions* ([Spears, 2007](#)) defines ‘granddad’ as ‘an old-fashioned person; an out-of-date person’ ([p. not available](#)). This usage of the term confirms what George is worried about – ‘Don’t be such a granddad. Live a little’ ([Spears, 2007](#)). In a very short space of time, and through no actions of his own, George has been moved from being a man with high expectations of his future to being one who is out of date and old. Ageist views, including his own as it turns out, surrounding the word grandfather (and its derivatives) change him from being a happy man to being confused and irritated.

Middle age is a time of equilibrium; one is neither young nor old yet the balance can be disturbed relatively-easily. A disparaging remark from a younger person, a joke birthday card suggesting that a 40-year-old is ‘over the hill’, or a job redundancy with little hope of re-employment due to age, can spark feelings of anxiety or anger. The following paper explored middle age in three comedy films: *Lost in Translation* ([Coppola, 2003](#)), *Wild Hogs* ([W. Becker, 2009b](#)) and *Something’s Gotta Give* ([Meyers, 2003](#)).

Name of paper	Author 1		Author 2		Author 3		Status
Representations of middle age in comedy film	Margaret Gatling	70%	Assoc Prof Jane Mills	20%	Assoc Prof David Lindsay	10%	Submitted to <i>The Qualitative Report</i>

Representations of middle age in comedy film: a 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 [A. 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 et al., 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. I 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.

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 8).

Table 8: Themes and manifestations of mid-life crisis

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

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

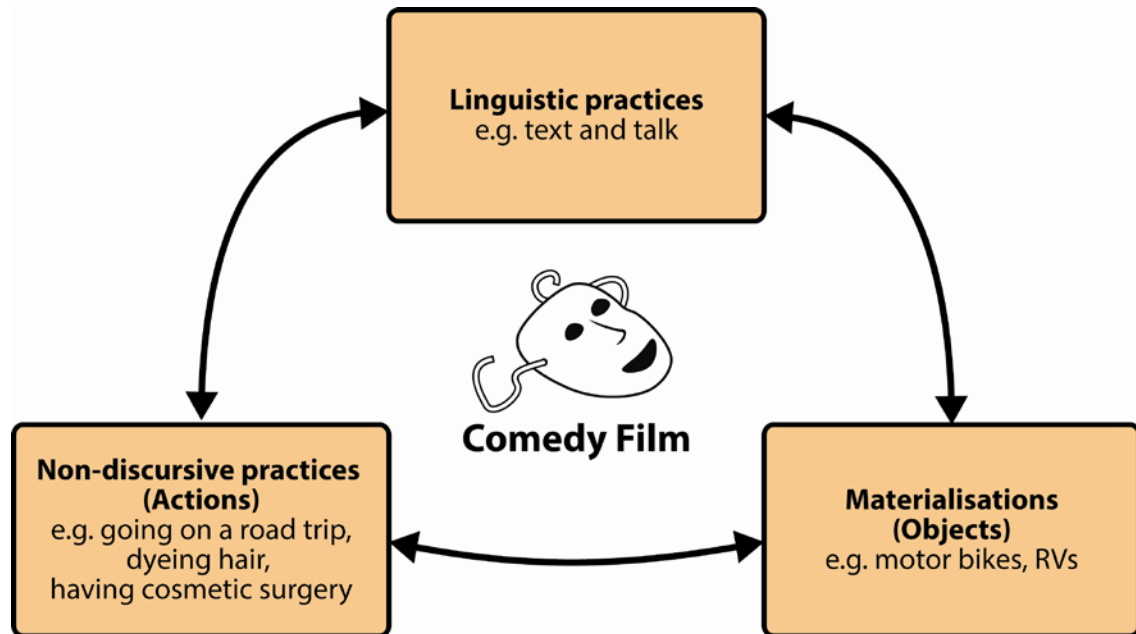
Methodology and method

The comedy films selected as the sample for this study were analysed 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 \(2009\)](#) suggest that Foucault's approach of '*bricolage*' is appropriate for researchers wishing to use dispositive analysis. *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 5 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 5: Dispositive analysis as applied to middle age in comedy film



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* ([W. Becker, 2009b](#)); 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.

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](#)).

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. The conversation is set out in Table 9:

Table 9: Lost in Translation Chapter 9

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

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 themselves constructing 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 then 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 advert, 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:

- 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:

Table 10: Lost in Translation, Chapter 20

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?

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

'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 tameness 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, describes the film as being about 'four middle-aged men at varying points of crisis in their lives' ([Pomerantz, 2011](#)). 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, but 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. The conversation is recounted in Table 11.

Table 11: Wild Hogs from 14 mins 19 secs

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!

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

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:

Table 12: Something's Gotta Give, Chapter 5 from 13 mins 15 seconds

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.

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 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 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 film makers 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.

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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End of manuscript

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I discussed the rationale for including middle age in a thesis about age and ageing. In the three comedy films selected for analysis there is a strong tendency to represent middle age as a time of crisis and to fall back on stereotypical scenarios such as road trips and fast cars to underpin what appears to be a largely-Western societal popular myth. Two of the films, *Lost in Translation* and *Wild Hogs*, were found to be mainly about mid-life crisis happening to men but the third film, *Something's Gotta Give*, explored issues relating to middle aged women, specifically single women in that demographic. Research findings about the experiences of real middle-aged women reflect many of the comments made about single middle aged women in the film, including suggestions that they are overlooked by men of their own age when opportunities for romance are involved ([Wiggs et al., 2011](#)).

Chapter 6 looks at another myth of ageing: namely that older people are not interested in or able to undertake sexual activity. Until relatively recently representations of old people's sexuality were taboo in film which both gave rise to, and supported, the notion of older people as celibate. As the 'baby boomer' generation moves towards retirement age, there has been some change in this representation. In chapter 6 the author considers a corpus of four comedy films where 'senior sexuality' is one of the themes to analyse whether the 'sexless' stereotype still exists.

CHAPTER SIX: DATA ANALYSIS: HOW IS THE SEXUALITY OF OLDER ADULTS REPRESENTED IN COMEDY FILM?

Introduction

The third research question I sought to answer was: in comedy film how is the sexuality of older adults represented? Older adult sexuality was shrouded in secrecy for so long that a dominant stereotype had surfaced of old age being asexual ([Kenny, 2013](#)). As a consequence, screen representations of older people's intimacy and sexuality have been rare until relatively recently ([Vares, 2009](#)). In the past 20 years, however, a new framing of older people's sexuality has emerged: the "sexy oldie" ([Vares, 2009, p.503](#)). This new representation is also problematic. Binary pathways have emerged where older people are cast as either asexual or actively engaging in sexual activity and there appears to be no middle ground. Some taboos endure: older characters are portrayed as predominantly heterosexual ([Chivers, 2011](#)) and older women's naked bodies are still deemed unwatchable ([Vares, 2009](#)).

In the portrayal of 'sexy oldies', the importance of intimacy has been overlooked ([Sandberg, 2013](#)). The undervaluing of the need for intimacy reduces the experience of sensuality and sexual expression down to coitus. The reality of many older people's lives is that closeness, warmth and emotional connection are more important than penetration ([Hinchliff, Gott, & Wylie, 2009](#); [Sandberg, 2013](#)). The sexuality of older people includes the entire spectrum of what can be considered sexual behaviour and, although the film industry has tentatively embraced the notion of older adults as sexual, tenderness and intimacy may have been overlooked.

Comedy film is fertile ground for the topic of senior sexuality because of the widespread societal view that older people do not have sex. An example of the discourse of age and ageing, is in the film *Meet the Fockers* ([Roach, 2004](#)). In this film, Roz Focker (Barbara Streisand), is a sex therapist who conducts sexercise classes for elderly couples. Looking at one scene through the lens of dispositive analysis I critiqued what was said, what objects were featured and what actions complemented the scene as a whole. The language used is an incongruous mixture of instructions about different sexual positions, including the 'reverse cowgirl', and warnings about shattering a pelvis. The couples are using large padded mats called 'Liberator Pads'. The webpage for the Liberator Pad [which is an actual item] suggests that users can, 'Make love under the stars, outdoors, and in nature; hard surfaces are no longer obstacles to your sexual adventures. Be spontaneous in the basement, by the pool or on the balcony'. Older adults are often sexually-active but intimating that they would be interested in

such exhibitionistic sexual behaviour has been added to the scene to enhance the comedic value. Actions, constituting the third part of the dispositive, are the overtly sexual exercises of thrusting and grinding, which the couples perform under the instruction of Dr Focker. In this scene particularly elderly actors have been cast and are dressed in exercise clothing designed to signpost spindly legs and scrawny arms. The sexuality of older people is acknowledged, but only as a vehicle for humour.

In the following paper, which is under review by *International Journal of Ageing and Later Life*, four comedy films have been critically-reviewed to explore how the sexuality of older characters is treated. The films are *Grumpy Old Men* ([Petrie, 1993](#)), *Hope Springs* ([Frankel, 2012](#)), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* ([Madden, 2012](#)) and *Beginners* ([Mills, 2010](#)).

Name of paper	Author 1		Author 2		Author 3		Status
Sex after 70? You've got to be Joking: representations of older adult sexuality in comedy film	Margaret Gatling	70%	A/Prof Jane Mills	20%	A/Prof David Lindsay	10%	Submitted to <i>International Journal of Ageing and Later Life</i>

Sex after 60 you've got to be joking! Senior sexuality in comedy film

Introduction

The sexuality of older people is often ignored or marginalised in film; until relatively recently the topic had been deemed as taboo and branded as unwatchable ([Walz, 2002](#)). Stereotypes of older people include the descriptor 'sexless' ([Hummert et al., 1994](#)), which could refer to not engaging in sexual activity and/or that the organs and attributes of gender such as breasts, ovaries, or penis are desiccated, shrivelled and no longer a sign of femininity or masculinity. In comedy films the sexuality of older characters, if featured at all, has often been treated as comical, particularly when older women are involved. Ageist stereotyping of older people in the media have, over time, created myths about ageing including myths surrounding later life sexuality. The Nottingham study of sexuality and ageing ([Bouman, Arcelus, & Benbow, 2006](#)) noted four myths about older people's sexuality, namely that a woman's sex life ends with menopause, that sex is for the young, that older people think they are too old to bother with sex, and that older people are asexual ([p.150](#)). These myths contrast with research findings that confirms it is usual for humans to have an interest in sex and engage in sexual activity their entire adult lives ([Gott & Hinchliff, 2003](#)). When the film industry perpetuates the stereotype of ageing as being asexual it does 'a great disservice to the general public, young and old alike' ([Bouman et al., 2006, p.150](#)) because for the young, old age has yet another dreadful aspect – celibacy - and for the old, their sexuality and need for intimacy is seen to be risible and an aberration.

The sexuality of older people has been ignored or denied for so long that Western culture has been lulled into thinking that older people are asexual. Research has shown that it is often young people who are most likely to believe this to be true ([LaTorre & Kear, 1977](#); [Waterman, 2012](#)). Older people themselves have contributed to the lack of understanding about their sexuality but, when the subject causes others to be incredulous, amused or disgusted, a discrete silence is often used to veil shame and embarrassment ([Bouman et al., 2006](#)). The media has created further marginalisation for gay, lesbian and transgender elders by casting old age as heteronormative ([Chivers, 2011](#)). For an older generation who kept their sexual orientation 'in the closet' because of fear of persecution and, possibly, prosecution there is the added insult of invisibility on-screen despite hard-won rights in recent years.

The authors of this paper examined 'senior sexuality' in four comedy films using Critical Discourse Analysis. The genre of comedy was chosen because humour is used as a

vehicle for the transmission of ideas that may be unacceptable in any other format. Comedy scriptwriters employ stereotyping, exaggeration, farce, slapstick, irony and many other tools of trade to poke fun at their characters. The sexuality of older adults has almost been a taboo in the genre of film and television drama, but the seemingly-incongruous notion of older people being sexual beings presents an ideal subject for comedy. When sex is linked with stereotypical material representations of older characters (such as walking frames, wrinkled faces, stooped posture, grey hair and ridiculously old-fashioned clothing) laughter is almost guaranteed.

Methodology and Methods

The chosen methodology was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) using the specific approach of Dispositive Analysis. All forms of CDA have the same objectives - to expose the links between language, power and ideology behind texts ([Fairclough, 1992](#)). CDA researchers hold the view that language both shapes society and is shaped by society ([Machin & Mayr, 2012](#)). Dispositive Analysis (DA) is an approach of CDA that is well-suited to the analysis of discourse in the medium of film. DA allows a researcher to examine a discourse via the triangular relationship between language (what can be said and written), materialisations or objects related to the discourse, and actions related to the discourse.

The decision to undertake an analysis of comedy films in relation to older adult sexuality arose from a wider study examining representations of older people in comedy film in general. To determine how older people are depicted in comedy film, a matrix was constructed with stereotypes of ageing on one axis and relevant films on the other. The films (n=51) were selected from the IMDb database of comedy films. An essential criterion for selection was a theme related to ageing. While reviewing the films, the researchers noticed that 'sexual' rather than 'sexless' was emerging as a feature of ageing in several of the films. This theme was consequently added to the matrix. The 51 films were reduced to a shortlist of nine following a review of all trailers and plot synopses. Three thematic areas were identified –representations of age and ageing in general, middle age, and 'senior sexuality'. The researchers considered the films to be representative of comedy classics and recent releases.

Four comedy films, were selected for analysis of the specific theme of older people's sexuality. The films are *Grumpy Old Men* ([Petrie, 1993](#)), *Hope Springs* ([Frankel, 2012](#)), *Beginners* ([Mills, 2010](#)), and *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* ([Stables, 2012](#)). All the films were viewed multiple times and notes were made of key scenes and plot points. In keeping with Dispositive Analysis, objects and actions linked to the discourse of old age and older people's sexuality were noted as well as the spoken language. For example, the character, Hal, in *Beginners*, purchases new clothes in keeping with his newly-revealed homosexuality. The

subtitle facility was activated while viewing the films to clarify speech. A copy of the screen play was also accessed where possible.

Findings

Grumpy Old Men

The storyline of *Grumpy Old Men* concerns two neighbours in their late 60s, John Gustafson and Max Goldman, who have been warring with each other for decades. Their long-running feud is exacerbated when they are both attracted to their vivacious new neighbour, Ariel. The DVD cover describes the two main characters, as ‘curmudgeons’, a stereotypically negative term for older people ([Hummert et al., 1994](#); [Schmidt & Boland, 1986](#)). The two men certainly are grumpy and have a gloomy outlook on life. Whenever news comes of an acquaintance that has died, both men voice their envy. One older man who has died in a car crash is described as a ‘lucky bastard’. They quibble about whether it is preferable to die of a stroke, a cardiac arrest or hyperthermia. For John and Max, old age means being lonely, celibate and health-impaired. Between them, they suffer from lumbago, gallstones, sciatica and shingles. Max announces that when he had ulcers it was like ‘farting razor blades’. Yet, how the old age of Max and John is represented linguistically is at a variance with what they do and how they act. John, despite his sciatica, is able to climb out of an upstairs window, clamber along a snowy roof and drop to the ground and both men are able to shovel snow energetically.

The two men are interested in Ariel from the first time they see her. Her bohemian ways intrigue them and she brings the colour and warmth of California into the snowscape of Minnesota. It is obvious that they not only find her an interesting diversion but also sexually-attractive. Ariel is very tactile and has a candid and open attitude to sexuality. On their first meeting she asks John if he is ‘gay or straight’. John cannot believe his ears and points out that asking a question like that might be alright in California but is not alright in Minnesota. Neither John nor Max is gay. They are heterosexual men who have not had sexual partners in a while. John says it has been 15 years since he had sex; he can even name the day. Max claims that he avoids women because they become too strongly attracted to him like something from *Fatal Attraction*. This is a claim that seems unlikely to be true as he dresses badly and, by his own admission, is rather smelly. It is obvious that lack of opportunity and diminishing self-confidence has led to celibacy for both men.

Sexuality in *Grumpy Old Men* is represented as something that continues to be important despite ageing. John’s 94-year-old father is extremely interested in sex and he implies that if given the opportunity he would be sexually-active. While exhorting his son to waste no time in commencing a sexual relationship with Ariel, he emphasises that life is too short to let

opportunities pass because the first 90 years or so go by really quickly. He advises, 'You mount the woman son ... or you send her out to me', thus confirming that age has not diminished desire.

The overt sexual crudity of the elder Gustafson contrasts with a restrained approach to the sexuality of the son. The film needs to deal with the 'dirty old man' image of older men's sexuality by assigning it to the extremely-elderly Grandpa Gustafson so as to leave the younger generation free to have a sex life without attracting the approbation of the audience. The elder Gustafson's bawdy language when talking about sex is complemented by crude arm gestures and hip thrusts. The filmmakers guarantee that the relationship between John and Ariel is not tainted by any vast disparity in age by casting Ariel as a woman in her 50s. Care is also taken to ensure that the lovers are not seen as promiscuous when Ariel declares that she hasn't had sex with anyone except her husband. John is nervous and mumbles about 'not being prepared' and says he's heard that safe sex is important, while revealing that he has not had sex in many years. What happens behind the firmly-closed bedroom door is not shown to viewers but, in the morning, an invigorated John slides around in his socks, spicing up his eggs with tabasco and singing Otis Redding's hit, *Love Man*.

So, what is senior sexuality like in *Grumpy Old Men*? Sexuality is shown to be normal for older people though for the very-elderly, it is linked with lust rather than love. Two rather chaste kisses are the only visual evidence of sexual behaviour but John declares that he had the best sex of his life with Ariel. By not showing any sexual activity between Ariel and John, the film's director has followed the unwritten rule for older couple's sexuality on screen, which dictates that it should be hinted at but not shown outright ([Bildtgård, 2000](#)). The main reason for this apparent coyness appears to be the perceived unattractiveness of older bodies ([Bildtgård, 2000](#); [Meah et al., 2011](#)). In a more recent film, *Hope Springs*, made nearly two decades later, some moments of an older couple's sexual encounters are shown on-screen but the director has still shied away from revealing ageing bodies during acts of intimacy.

Hope Springs

Hope Springs follows Kay and Arnold, a married couple in their 60s, as they grapple with intimacy issues which are blighting their marriage. They sleep in separate bedrooms and have not had sex in almost five years. Kay can remember the exact date. In a desperate attempt to regain what she considers to be a proper marriage (one with sexual intimacy and emotional connection) Kay arranges for them to travel to Maine for a week of marriage therapy with a celebrated counsellor. For both Kay and Arnold, the therapy sessions are painful and awkward as they are asked to reveal intimate details of their sexual history, their fantasies and to explain how they feel about their present situation.

The awkwardness felt by the couple as they talked about their sexuality was matched by the discomfort felt by some viewers. One reviewer labelled it 'unwatchable' and said it would be an 'outright embarrassment' if Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones were not there [as celebrated actors] to redeem it ([Denby, 2012](#)). The discourse of ageing includes erroneous assumptions about older people's sexuality and many younger people assume that sexual activity ceases in old age. Young people are surprised and sometimes shocked by the idea that old people are still sexually-active ([K. R. Allen & Roberto, 2009](#); [Waterman, 2012](#)). In *Hope Springs* there is an obvious tension between representing Kay and Arnold as sexual beings and the director's reluctance to explore that sexuality on-screen in a way it might be done if the actors were 30 years younger. The New York Magazine's reviewer ([Edelstein, 2013](#)) commented, 'in a culture in which our objects of fantasy are all young and freakishly fit, even something as vanilla as the sight of Jones gingerly caressing Streep's bare thigh can seem shocking, even transgressive' ([p. not available](#)).

There is no clear reason why intimacy between older couples on screen should transgress any boundaries yet Hollywood in particular appears to self-censor this issue when the woman is middle-aged or older. Thus it would appear to be older women's bodies that are considered 'taboo' rather than men's. Older men in other films display no such coyness when paired with women much younger than themselves. Examples include Sean Connery, Liam Neeson and Harrison Ford. In another comedy about later life romance, *Something's Gotta Give* ([Meyers, 2003](#)), Jack Nicholson, playing the ageing lothario Harry Sanborn, walks around in his white briefs, displaying his portly frame without a care in the world but when he briefly glimpses the naked body of Erica on the way to her shower, they are both shocked. She shields her nakedness; he covers his eyes. Similarly, in *About Schmidt* ([Payne, 2002](#)) Nicholson lounges semi naked in a hot tub but when Roberta, his 54-year-old soon-to-be 'in-law' joins him, her nakedness forces him to jump from the tub and exit, leaving as if pursued by a bear. The scene caused much discussion about the brief glimpse of Kathy Bates' naked body with her pendulous breasts and rounded belly ([Henerson, 2003](#)). In film, a woman's naked body becomes unacceptable with age. One website commented that Bates' nakedness was shocking because 'geriatric nudity is generally frowned-upon, especially in a rather mainstream movie' ([Weird Worm, 2010](#)).

There is no nakedness in *Hope Springs* but there is little passion either. It is a film that confirms and supports the notion that older people have a need for intimacy on one hand, yet the film shies away from treating on-screen intimacy in the same way as it would be with a younger couple. The film has been criticised by many viewers as not being funny - merely awkward and uncomfortable to watch. Very few films about older people's sexuality have been made and *Hope Springs* presented an opportunity for a foray into largely unexplored territory.

By making the characters so ill-at-ease with their own sexuality, however, the stereotyping of older people as 'sexless' was perpetuated. Kay's sensible nightdresses, frumpy clothes and nervous way of talking do not signal her as a confident woman, happy with her body and comfortable in her sexuality. The therapist gives the couple increasingly more intimate exercises as their homework but, for a couple for whom the extent of physical closeness has been a perfunctory peck on the cheek for years, even the simplest assignment is too difficult. Their attempt at a hug was the awkward embrace of two acquaintances who felt that the relationship had progressed beyond a handshake but a kiss was one step too far.

Both partners carried the baggage of issues with sexual intimacy. Kay could not bring herself to have oral sex with Arnold even though he would have liked it and Arnold suffered from a loss of libido. Eventually, all is resolved but the film has done little to dispel myths about older adult sexuality and most likely confirms commonly-held beliefs that senior sexual lives are beset with physical and emotional difficulties before eventually petering out. For younger viewers, this scenario provides a glimpse at their own possible futures. It is little wonder that, as a comedy, the film was met with mixed acceptance.

Heterosexuality and homosexuality in *Marigold Hotel* and *Beginners*

Older age in film is usually depicted as sexless – but it is a heterosexual sexlessness ([Chivers, 2011](#)). Older couples are usually shown as a man and a woman: sometimes devoted to each other with intimacy shown as patting each other's hands affectionately. Sometimes the intimacy is expressed simply as living together like long term lodgers in the same house. Older people are rarely represented as being gay. There is a long tradition of 'campness' in comedy films, especially in British comedy such the *Carry On* sequence of films, which relied heavily on innuendo and double entendre. Only from the late 1960s, with the legalisation of homosexuality in Britain, have films tackled the subject openly without resorting to 'subterfuge and outrageous coding' ([Burton & Chibnall, 2013, p.183](#)). The newly-won liberalism in relation to representations of homosexuality have not been afforded to older characters so generously. Two recent comedy films have emerged that challenge the heteronormativity of old age. They are *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* ([Madden, 2012](#)) and *Beginners* ([Mills, 2010](#)).

The *Marigold Hotel* follows a disparate group of British retirees eking out their pension funds in a run-down but exotically beautiful hotel in India. The issues that preoccupy them are much more than financial worries. Jean and Douglas have been married for nearly 40 years but the marriage has deteriorated into bitterness and sniping on Jean's part, with Douglas 'treading on eggshells' as he quietly tries to mollify her and maintain an optimistic outlook. Muriel, confined to a wheelchair following hip surgery outsourced to India (a snipe at NHS waiting lists), has no partner and no children. She has spent her life in 'service' looking after

other people. Evelyn is newly-widowed and is coming to terms with the realisation that entrusting her future entirely to her husband has left her financially insecure and responsible for his debts. She is lonely and relishes the easy friendship which springs up between herself and Douglas – a 63 year old man who is 15 years her junior. Madge is a divorcee, tired of being used as a babysitter by her daughter and son-in-law, who is looking out for a rich husband. Norman, a 70 year single man, is looking for sex. He tried speed dating back in the UK without success, despite cunningly underestimating his age on the application form by about 25 years. The seventh and final member of the group is Graham - recently retired as a senior judge and returning to his childhood home in India to search for Manoj, his lover from decades early. Graham was packed off to university in England when their illicit homosexual relationship was discovered. Manoj's father, who had worked for Graham's family for years, was sacked and Manoj's family moved away in disgrace.

The ease with which Graham is able to reveal his homosexuality, and the calm acceptance of his fellow residents on hearing about it, allows heterosexuality and homosexuality equal footing in *Marigold Hotel*. When Graham finally tracks down Manoj, the warmth of their embrace confirms that neither of them has forgotten the depth of their relationship and old age had not dimmed the vitality of their emotions. The capacity for older people to accept this relationship, consummated forty years earlier, is demonstrated by Manoj's wife who says they had no secrets from each other, and she knew about the affair before she married him.

Heterosexual characters in the film have a wide spectrum of needs. At one end of the spectrum is Muriel, who never indicates that she yearns for intimacy. The kindness she experiences from an 'untouchable' woman breaks down her crusty, racist exterior to reveal her vulnerability and hurt. She had no family of her own so she invested everything in the family for whom she worked. Ultimately, what she did for them out of devotion, love and loyalty was seen by them as simply her job. When she became old, she was no longer useful and she was dismissed – providing a reflection of society's attitude to the elderly in general. At the other end of the spectrum are Norman and Madge. They both voice their desire for sexual intimacy. Madge is pragmatic and recognises that her ideal partner should also be wealthy. Norman just wants to experience the joy of sex again. In a scene where he and Madge have accidentally met in the prestigious Viceroy Club bar, he recognises that they both have the same yearning, which is not just sexual but is more fundamental – a need to feel wanted and liberated from the cares of ageing:

Why must you mock? I just want to feel young again, to be needed as much as I need, if only for one night, one wonderful night. Tell me you don't know how that feels.

Madge knows exactly how that feels and consequently sets in motion a chain of events that eventually leads Norman to begin a relationship with an older woman, Carol. Carol is also lonely and looking for the companionship and the comfort that partnership brings - and they have sex. Madge's own quest for love is spurred on by her resistance to ageing. She may be in a hotel for the 'elderly and beautiful', as the owner has styled it, but at 59, she knows she could have nearly three decades of life ahead of her and she dreads that future. Well aware of ageism and the cruelties it brings, she says she does not want 'to be condescended to, ignored and marginalised by society, to become peripheral to the action.' Ironically, Madge herself, with the arrogance of her relative youth, mocked 70-year-old Norman as being like 'something in a museum'. This is an example of what [Nelson \(2011\)](#) calls the 'strange case of prejudice against the older you' ([p.37](#)) where, despite knowing that old age comes to everyone who lives long enough, and also knowing that it brings derision and lack of status, it is imperative to create a gulf between oneself and that future event. Romance and sexuality is really important to Madge and she tells Carol that if her life with men is over, she doesn't know what is left.

Marigold Hotel explores diversity in its images of ageing and of sexuality. Yes, there is a grumpy, old woman needing a hip replacement and there are cash-strapped self-funded retirees with grey hair, but there are also positive images of older people seeking a new life, starting afresh, getting a job for the first time, falling in love, laughing, and making new friendships. Symbols of ageing - a wheelchair and a Viagra - are cast aside in the end. Jean, a 'fish out of water' in the unfamiliar Indian environment, rages against the actions of the group in taking such a bold step. She is imprisoned in a glass cage of ageist stereotypes which she herself accepts. She likens their actions to 'a group of self-deluding old fossils traipsing around as if it's [their] bloody gap year'. In doing this, she brackets a disparate group with ages ranging from late 50s to late 70s into one homogenous unit. In reality, the group spans two generations and includes people from all areas of the social spectrum including a high court judge and a housekeeper. The group has less in common with teenagers on a gap year and more in common with the hippies of the 60s and 70s who travelled to India to 'find themselves'. All the members of the group do 'find themselves' in India. New experiences and new relationships re-invigorate them and there is positivity about the future. Even Jean finds the courage to admit to Douglas that their marriage is a shell and she acknowledges the effort he has put in to keep the shell intact. She returns to England alone but extremely happy.

Sonny describes his guests at the Marigold Hotel as 'long in the tooth' and reminds them that they have 'heard the chimes at midnight'. His goal is for them to live out what days they have left in his haven for the elderly from countries who 'do not like old people', as he rather undiplomatically states. Significantly, amidst his flowery and poetic language, Sonny has

identified what his guests intend to do, possibly what all older people aspire to do, that is *live* out their days, not *wait* out their days.

‘Living until you die’ is also a theme in the final film analysed, *Beginners*. The storyline in this film moves back and forth between past and present as Oliver narrates the story of his father, Hal, who had died recently at age 79 - four years after revealing he was gay. Graham in *Marigold Hotel* described himself as being gay ‘more in theory than practice these days’. When Hal reveals his homosexuality to Oliver he says ‘I don’t just want to be theoretically gay. I want to do something about it’. Having spent 44 years living the life of a straight man with a wife and son, he has a lot of catching up to do. Oliver describes his father’s rapid immersion in the world of homosexual men. He bought new, fashionable, more flamboyant clothes; he joined Prime Timers – an organisation that provides older gay and bisexual men the opportunity to enrich their lives and he acquired a boyfriend. Finding a boyfriend was not easy, as Hal explains to Oliver, ‘Young gay men don’t go for old gay men’.

Hal’s desire to cram into his new gay life as much fun as possible leads him to advertise for a partner. Typically adverts looking for a partner coyly suggest that the writer is looking for friendship which might lead to something more intimate. Hal’s advert reverses this. ‘I’m looking for sex with the hope that it turns into friendship or a relationship’, he states as his opening line. Such a bald statement shows the urgency of Hal’s need for a sexual relationship. Hal’s statement echoes Carol’s observation in *Marigold Hotel* after she has invited Norman to live with her – ‘at our age we can’t afford the luxury of taking it slow’. Hal, at 79 years of age, needs to grasp every experience he can and that includes fulfilling his sexual needs as a gay man.

Beginners is a comedy film that does not poke fun at older people. There is little, if any, stereotyping of old age and older people’s sexuality and it represents the homosexuality of its central character openly with hugs and kisses. Hal’s homosexuality is accepted, even by his son, although Oliver remains confused by the charade his parents kept up for 44 years. As a representation of an older man, Hal resists stereotyping. His age is irrelevant as he eschews the clothes of an elderly retiree. He reclothes and reinvents himself as the man he has always been secretly – a lover of parties, movie nights and fireworks and, simply, a lover.

All four films analysed are listed as comedies however it is worth noting that although the earliest of the four, *Grumpy Old Men*, contains many instances of slapstick and witty repartee, the humour aspect of the later films has been questioned by reviewers. Both the IMDb and Rotten Tomatoes websites contain numerous reviews finding the subject matter awkward, moving and touching, but not particularly amusing. Maybe, in coming to terms with senior

sexuality, filmmakers have not yet hit their stride because representing sexuality in older people, despite being a natural human behaviour, is a relatively-new subject matter for film.

Conclusion

All four films analysed represent older people as sexual beings and, in doing so, give lie to perceptions about the celibacy of old age. The characters talk frankly about the ongoing need for intimacy as they grow older. For most of the characters, intimacy includes sexual activity and desire has not diminished. The ages of the characters range from 59-year-old Madge in *Marigold Hotel* to 94-year-old Grandpa Gustafson in *Grumpy Old Men*. The degree of need for intimacy and the extent to which a character will go to pursue it, varies, yet there is not a single character who does not respond enthusiastically to the chance of intimacy whether it be platonic or sexual.

Hollywood may still prefer older people to be celibate, monogamous and heterosexual but, occasionally, films are released that present a different view. Old age holds a multitude of fears for those people who are not there yet. Ill health, loneliness, loss of independence and financial difficulties are among those fears of old age. To top it all off is the perception that ageing is accompanied by a loss of intimacy - one of the most basic human needs. Films, such as those discussed in this paper, that counteract that view will assist not only in redressing inaccuracy about ageing, but may assist in addressing the fears that ultimately lead to ageism. Older people's sexuality on-screen is still labelled as unwatchable by some viewers and reviewers but with the topic is appearing more frequently in film. Senior sexuality will be normalised eventually, having received the film industry's imprimatur. As Gramsci pointed out those people and groups that control the media have power over societal opinions ([Hoare & Nowell-Smith, 1971](#)). Therefore, if the film industry sanctions senior sexuality, what has always been known by older people themselves will become credible and accepted by wider society. Sex over 60 is not a joke.

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* *End of manuscript* *

Chapter summary

In this chapter, I discussed senior sexuality and its representation in comedy films. I included a paper, currently under review, which analyses four comedy films that feature older adults who have sexual relationships. During the 20 years that separate the first film *Grumpy Old Men* from the most recent, *Hope Springs*, representations of older people as sexual beings have become more prevalent. I would venture to say that the humour associated with senior sexuality has largely moved away from comedy based on the incongruity of the idea. The current locus of humour lies in sexual dysfunction and the difficulties of finding a sexual partner. Homosexuality is also emerging as a theme, thereby challenging the framing of old age sexuality as being predominantly the province of straight couples. Research into older people's sexual needs has shown that being intimate with another person by actions such as talking and cuddling are as important as overtly sexual activities. This aspect of older people's sensuality was not a predominant feature in the films analysed. The reason for this may lie in the propensity of comedy films to feature dysfunctional scenarios which, in the discourse of senior sexuality, are erectile dysfunction, loss of libido or hyper-sexuality. Older people cuddling, holding hands or talking tenderly just might not be very funny.

In the next chapter I summarise the findings from the nine films. I also discuss the differences in representations of age and ageing that emerged from the four sub-genre of comedy which made up the dataset. When I analysed the films using three themes, age and ageing, middle age and sexuality of older people films, I grouped the films under those thematic headings. When the data set is amalgamated four subgroups of mainstream, romantic comedy, dramedy and children's animation emerge. In summarising the findings I also note how these different sub-genre have differing perspectives on the discourse of age and ageing.

CHAPTER SEVEN: OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter I summarise and comment on the findings from the nine comedy films which were analysed in this study. In the three previous chapters, I discussed specific themes in specific films. I looked at two films which had a common theme of loss and grief in old age, three films relating to mid-life, and four films in which older adult sexuality is a significant feature. In summarising the findings I wanted to ‘cut the cake’ another way and discuss an interesting feature that emerges – differences in the representations of age and ageing within the various sub-genres of comedy.

Comedy films and representations of age and ageing-a summary

Comedy films attract more viewers than any other genre. Comedies have garnered nearly 30% of the market share of profits in the past 17 years ([Nash Information Services, 2012](#)). The popularity of comedy reflects my own interests. My taste in comedy is eclectic, and I enjoy the mainstream hits of Steve Martin and Ben Stiller as well as the more intellectually-demanding offerings of Woody Allen and Bill Murray. The films analysed in the thesis fell largely into four sub-genres:

- Mainstream comedy: (Wild Hogs, Charlie and Boots, Grumpy Old Men). Mainstream comedies appeal to a broad audience demographic and are distributed widely. They are characterised by slapstick and sight gags. The plots usually involve a chain of unlikely events that culminate in a disastrous situation from which the main characters have to extricate themselves.
- Romantic comedy: (Something’s Gotta Give, The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel). In this genre, plots revolve around relationships and love. Typically, a romance is beset with problems before ultimately culminating in a happy outcome. Romantic comedies resonate with audiences because love is a universal need ([Voytilla & Petri, 2003](#)).
- Dramedy: (Lost in Translation, Hope Springs, Beginners). The word ‘dramedy’ is a neologism used to describe film or television that combines drama and comedy. The narrative concerns a serious issue or situation that is punctuated by comic elements.
- Children’s animation: (Up). The content in children’s animations contains elements to amuse children such as slapstick and fantasy, while maintaining the interest of accompanying adults. There is always a villain and a hero/heroine with whom children.

There are other comedy sub-genres including black comedy, arthouse comedy and teenage films. None of these categories were included in the study.

When I set out to analyse representations of age and ageing in comedy film, I did not expect the different sub genres to have such different perspectives on the subject. As the films selected for analysis contained examples from several sub-genres I have been able to draw some conclusions, not only about representations in comedy in general, but also about some of the differences between the sub-genres.

The mainstream comedies

In the mainstream comedy films I analysed the humour was usually obvious rather than subtle. A reliance on stereotypical depictions, not only of ageing, but also of race, gender and social groups such as bikies, ensure that audiences do not have to work too hard to be amused. The stereotypes resonate with what viewers have been exposed to before and there is little invitation to question or challenge representations ([Park et al., 2006](#)). There is a reliance on visual humour and slapstick, where characters fall over, have accidents or are caught naked or half-dressed in embarrassing situations. This type of humour in which the viewer laughs at another's misfortunes or embarrassment is known by the German word, Schadenfreude. There are many examples of Schadenfreude in the mainstream films selected for the study. In *Grumpy Old Men*, one character slips off his snowy roof while avoiding the tax man. In *Wild Hogs*, there are three separate incidents where characters fall off their motorbikes and, in both *Charlie and Boots* and *Wild Hogs*, the main characters are chased by angry bulls. A character's age is no barrier to the 'pratfalls' they endure, thereby setting up an interesting juxtaposition between the stereotype of stiff and slow-moving old age on one hand and an image of a much more agile older person on the other.

The mainstream comedy about middle age, *Wild Hogs*, employs nearly every stereotype of male mid-life crisis: the road trip, anxieties about failed aspirations, motor bike riding, and rebelling against current ways of life are all present. The whole premise of the plot is that the four middle-aged friends need to undertake a journey to prove to themselves and their families that they still have a thirst and capacity for adventure. At the end of the film they have achieved their dual goals of reaching the West Coast and re-establishing themselves as confident men.

The film, *Charlie and Boots*, is ambivalent in its treatment of ageing. Charlie is grief-stricken and reclusive following the unexpected death of his wife but grief and withdrawal are common reactions, even in younger people. His irascible manner and stubborn pride are stereotypical representations of older people yet he also resists stereotyping in his physical

agility and his capacity as a prankster. Many of the older women featured are sharp-tongued and conform to the shrew/curmudgeon stereotype identified by a number of researchers ([Hummert et al., 1994](#); [Magoffin, 2007](#)).

Sexuality is touched on in both *Charlie and Boots* and *Grumpy Old Men*. *Wild Hogs* does not comment on the sexuality of the characters other than a brief conversation during which Woody rebukes his friends for commenting on the desirability of his wife. The film is described as family entertainment therefore sexuality is not an appropriate theme. *Charlie and Boots* highlights that Charlie is still attractive to older women but he does not reciprocate their interest. One woman who wants to get to know Charlie better is represented as a female truck driver. She has the physical appearance of a woman in her 60s with a lined, weather-beaten face. She is dressed in mannish clothing, has very short cropped hair and sports several tattoos. The scenario has been deliberately designed to be comical; a woman who has eschewed all feminine traits has set her sights on Charlie. She pursues him like a black widow spider looking for a mate. Charlie is not attracted to her and appears intimidated by her sexuality. If the situation was reversed and the woman was a male trucker with tattoos attracted to a woman of his own age, the humour in the situation would be diminished.

In *Grumpy Old Men* two older men pursue the same woman. Much of the humour lies, not in the eventual sexual relationship that occurs, but in the talk about sexual prowess in which the men engage. They expect that men of their age will have erectile dysfunction. When one of their friends has dinner in the woman's house but denies having had sex with her, the other men assume he is covering up for his own inability to perform. The film ends with the marriage of one of their elderly friends and the woman they both admired, but the expectation of diminished sexual prowess remains. As he waves the happy couple off on their honeymoon, the vanquished suitor tells the groom 'I'll lay eight-to-five you can't get it up the entire honeymoon.' Sexual dysfunction, rather than sexuality, is final image in the film.

The romantic comedies

The romantic comedies in the data-set, did not, on the whole, use obvious negative stereotyping to represent ageing. In *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* the business plan of the manager of the hotel was to create a peaceful place for the unwanted, unloved older generations from other nations – the type of place often labelled as 'God's waiting room'. In early scenes of this film, one of the guests, Mrs Donnelly, is portrayed rather stereotypically as bad tempered, closed-minded and debilitated by the need for a hip replacement but, by the end of the film, she is out of her wheelchair and working as the hotel's assistant manager. At the start of the film Mrs Donnelly tells her doctor that, at her age, she 'doesn't even buy green bananas' but this humorous, though morbid, estimation of her life expectation is not sustained. Losing both her

capacity for mobility and her sense of value has led to her gloomy attitude. When both of these issues are addressed, her physical and emotional wellbeing are improved. Mrs Donnelly continues to make witty, albeit rather sharp-tongued observations, but her restoration to good health and the realisation that she still has a contribution to make mean that that they are no longer directed towards herself. None of the other characters is shown to be infirm, physically or mentally. It is true that one member of the party dies but it is as a result of a long-standing heart disease rather than being age-related. Objects associated with old age –a wheelchair and Viagra - are discarded by the end of the film. Sexual relationships flourish, as do relationships which cherish the need for intimate closeness thus dispelling the myth of sexlessness.

The group is seen to be diverse in backgrounds, needs and expectations, which reflects the diversity of real-world 60 and 70-year-olds. Negative stereotypes are minimal and there is a definite tendency towards the ‘golden agers’ with characters displaying wisdom and a thirst for travel. The ‘perfect grandparent’ image is tarnished by Madge’s refusal to babysit her grandchildren for the third night in a row. She is not lacking emotional attachment to her grandchildren but displaying a stronger compunction to fulfil her own needs. In summary, *Marigold Hotel* invites viewers to consider that the experience of old age is not always about endings. The ending of a marriage through widowhood or the ending of a career through retirement or redundancy holds both the possibility of new experiences and aspirations as well as the sadness of loss. The comedy is not so much directed at old age as at the ‘fish-out-of-water’ experiences any group of inexperienced travellers might encounter in a country like India with its rich tapestry of colours, smells, unfamiliar customs and foods.

The second romantic comedy considered, *Something’s Gotta Give*, looks at late middle age (or early old age depending on what definition is used). Some of the humour in this film lies in classically-comical situations, underpinned by embarrassment and incongruity, such as Erica and Zoe discovering Harry wearing nothing but shirt and underpants, rifling around in their fridge like a hungry home invader. Much of the action in the film takes place in Erica’s luxurious, tastefully-decorated beach house. She is a successful playwright who has, as her sister puts it, ‘brains and beauty’. It would be easy to suspect that Erica has the perfect life. She appears to be in good health, has no financial worries, a loving daughter, and experiences cordial relations with her ex-husband. The film’s plot hinges on the attainment of the one thing that Erica did not realise that she was lacking - romance. As Zoe points out, she is denied this because of her age. 63-year-old Harry has no problem finding romantic partners but confines his choices to women younger than 30. Zoe suggests that beauty resides in younger women and, therefore, older women are disregarded. She forcefully and eloquently voices the inequity of this situation and that is the ‘take-home message’ of the film. Zoe is explaining her theory to Harry but also to the audience. Later in the film Harry is seemingly shocked and repulsed by

Erica's 50-year-body and Erica herself is so ashamed that she swathes herself in concealing clothes. While Harry's shock and Erica's over-reaction are moments of pure farce, the underlying message is that the older female body must be hidden.

The romantic comedies analysed feature two different age cohorts; late middle age as one group and old age as the other but they have one significant aspect in common in their approaches to sexuality and romance; happiness is brought about by people seeking partners within their own age group. In *Something's Gotta Give*, Harry's restless questing for new partners is soothed when he settles down with the age-appropriate Erica. The lonely Norman, in *Marigold Hotel*, acknowledges his true age and finds happiness with an older woman, Carol.

The dramedies

The three dramedies, *Lost in Translation*, *Hope Springs* and *Beginners*, span middle age through to late old age. The age difference between the middle-aged Bob in *Lost in Translation* and 80-year-old Hal in *Beginners* is around 25 years. It could have been expected that Bob, as the much younger man, would have had the more positive outlook on life but it was Hal who filled his final years with new experiences, undertaken with enthusiasm and exuberance. Bob's melancholy and ennui, as depicted in his brief sojourn in Tokyo, show mid-life to be a dreadful period, lacking anticipation of any bright future. The humour in *Beginners* is not directed towards Hal and his newly-publicised homosexuality but towards the awkward acceptance of the situation by his son. *Lost in Translation* is similar in that mid-life crisis is not the source of comedy. The crisis, understated as it is, is played out in unfamiliarity territory, language and culture - the nuances of which are lost on Bob. It is in that space that the humour occurs: Bob in the hospital waiting room trying to communicate with an old Japanese man, Bob running away from an angry, laser-gun wielding bartender without any comprehension as to the cause.

In between these two films lies the late middle age of Arnold and Kay in *Hope Springs*. What [Chivers \(2011\)](#) has described as the 'banality' ([p.xvi](#)) of middle age is apparent in the humdrum life of this couple typified by him falling asleep every night while watching the golfing channel and her silently cooking bacon and eggs for him each morning. The humour in this film is directed at attempts of two staid, unadventurous sexagenarians to follow the sexuality homework instructions of a therapist. Neither of the other two films dwells on sexuality as problematic. *Hope Springs* does little to suggest to younger viewers that Arnold and Kay's situation is unusual as there are no other couples of a similar age in the film to use as a yardstick, therefore a sexless later life is, to some extent, normalised. *Hope Springs* has been criticised as being humourless. It may be that, in the sub-genre of dramedy, the serious

implications for a sexless later life, lacking intimacy, variety and vivacity are too dark and do not provide enough material for laughter.

Children's animation

Up is the sole example of children's animated film in my data corpus. Some of the themes of age and ageing are absent completely. The filmmakers do not reveal if the elderly hero's middle age was a time of crisis however there is no evidence to suggest that it was. Carl and his wife, Ellie, retain exuberance for life as they work together in the zoo and we often see them demonstrating resilience and good humour as they weather various setbacks including large repair bills to both house and car. Overt sexuality does not feature except the early disappointment of infertility, yet the couple are often seen holding hands and hugging right up until Ellie's death. There is a tension between negative and positive age stereotyping with grumpiness, withdrawal and poor mobility being featured strongly. On the positive side, wisdom, determination, loyalty and independence are also prominent aspects of Carl's characterisation. Children's animations often portrayed older characters but rarely as a hero. Comedy writers [Voytilla and Petri \(2003\)](#) identify the attributes of a children's hero as someone, be it human, animal or ogre, who challenges and tricks authority and who can use the 'ordinary tools of the child in unique ways' ([p.72](#)). Carl does all these things as he resists the authority of both a magistrate and two nurses. He uses balloons - tools of childhood - to thwart those who sought to curtail his independence and he floats away to freedom and adventure. As a consequence of Carl's diverse attributes, *Up* is an excellent resource to demonstrate human potential at any age.

Chapter summary

This chapter summarised the themes from the nine films in the data set and included some insights into the significance of different sub-genre of comedy in representations of age and ageing. A variance in the aims and comic techniques of each sub-genre has resulted in different perspectives. In the dataset analysed, the mainstream comedies relied more on stereotyping of age, race, culture and gender. The romantic comedies were driven towards a resolution of love issues and this imperative resisted discrimination on the grounds of age. If older characters were in love, age was not seen as a barrier with the only caveat being that both partners should be of a similar vintage. The three dramedies seemed to be disinclined to locate humour in stereotyping of age and located the comedic elements in other aspects such as taking characters out of their 'comfort zone'. Facing up to an elderly parent's long-concealed homosexuality, coping with a culture clash in Tokyo, and being asked personal questions about

one's intimate sexual details by a stranger provide comedy rather than specific issues of age and ageing.

In the next chapter I return to my reasons for undertaking this thesis and draw together the conclusions I reached after looking at the ways that age and ageing are represented in the selected comedy films. I suggest ways of applying the findings so that the practices of health professionals, including my colleagues in the nursing profession could be improved in relation to older clients. The chapter includes suggestions about the development of health care policies that promote recognition of the needs of older people. I also provide some recommendations that address ways of increasing critical awareness of the impact that media representations have on opinions and behaviours. The thesis concludes with suggestions for future enquiry into forms of new media in which the discourse of age and ageing has not yet been critically-analysed.

CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

I began this thesis with a quotation from Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, in which the stages of a man's life are laid out from birth to death. I chose the quotation, with its melancholy take on old age and death, to illustrate that representations of age and ageing have intrigued and influenced us throughout history ([Pike, 2012](#)). I begin this final chapter with a reaffirmation of the importance of the words and images - served up as entertainment - that influence people's opinions, attitudes and behaviours about age and ageing. From childhood, we absorb ideas about old age through literature and the arts. In children's entertainment, fairy stories and animations, older characters usually fall into two categories: 'evil and powerful' or 'benign but helpless'. There are numerous examples of both representations; an old witch entices Hansel and Gretel into her gingerbread house so she can eat them; an old woman coaxes Snow White to eat the poisoned apple; elderly Mr Burns from *The Simpsons* pollutes the planet and exploits his workers. Benign older characters are vulnerable and weak; Little Red Riding Hood's grandma is eaten by a wolf; Grandpa Simpson lives in a nursing home, speaks in a querulous voice and is, by turns, patronised or ignored by his family. By the time children develop into adults, impressions have been formed that will be ratified or questioned, not only by their experience of real-life older people, but also by ideas and concepts to which they are exposed when they enjoy the most popular form of audio-visual entertainment – comedy film ([Nash Information Services, 2012](#)).

In this chapter, I briefly sum up the findings from my analysis of comedy films and the way age and ageing is represented in this genre. I reflect on my personal journey as I researched and wrote this thesis and outline the valuable lessons I learned about critically-analysing the messages to which I am exposed every day. I draw on my study to suggest ways to address and prevent ageist attitudes and behaviours in the nursing profession. Particularly, I discuss the introduction of critical film analysis into nurse education programs to raise awareness of students' attitudes to ageing. The thesis concludes with suggestions about the direction of further research.

How are age and ageing represented in comedy film? What this thesis contributes to existing knowledge

During analysis of the nine comedy films in the dataset, I found that age and ageing continue to be represented in stereotypical and inaccurate ways. The extent and use of stereotypes is largely-dependent on the sub-genre of comedy. Mainstream comedies are driven by a desire to provide as many laughs as possible to please audiences. Stereotypes, associated

with gender, race and culture, as well as those linked to ageing, resonate with what audience members believe they already 'know'. Tapping into these shared 'understandings', images and sometimes – prejudices – facilitates humour. Stereotyping moves along at the pace an audience expects. Dramedies (drama-comedy hybrids) were less likely to rely on stereotyping as a source of humour. In some films, physical or mental frailty was featured (such as Hal dying of cancer in *Beginners* and Kay's deep unhappiness in *Hope Springs*) but these aspects were not used as a vehicle for comedy. In these films, there is a tension between drama and comedy. If cancer and sadness are portrayed as funny, where is the drama to reside? To better-illustrate this point, I mention the treatment of a usually-sad event – a funeral – in a mainstream comedy film, *Death at a Funeral* ([Oz, 2007](#)). The funeral of a family patriarch becomes a legitimate vehicle for comedy. Comedic moments are milked from the service, eulogy, coffin and even the man's dead body in this 'straight comedy'.

Analysis of films for the stereotype of sexlessness in later life revealed interesting results. More than a decade ago, [Bildtgård \(2000\)](#), wondered if the large cohort of middle-aged people approaching retirement would rebel against the idea of seeing their later life represented on screen as sexless. [Walz \(2002\)](#) was certain this group would make changes and foretold that the baby boomer generation would 'challenge existing representations and forge new ones' ([p.111](#)). The films I analysed indicated these researchers were correct in their predictions, but that the pace of change is slow and some taboos are stronger than others. Older adult sexuality, which was taboo on screen until recently, is becoming a legitimate topic for film portrayal. When a film attempts to reflect some sort of 'normal' life, it is usual now for older people to be depicted experiencing sexual activity or, at the least, intimacy. Naked ageing female bodies, however, are still considered inappropriate for the screen.

Reflections on the study

I started this PhD study with a clear idea about what I was going to look for and strong opinions about where I might find it. I thought I would be looking at representations of people who were old. I thought, rather naively, that there is consensus about when 'being old' begins. I was wrong. There is no consensus and to my surprise (and shock), I discovered that, as a woman in my 50s, I am considered to be old by many researchers and filmmakers. A person's physical age is identified by the number of years since their birth. Descriptions of age, however, depend very much on personal perspective. A teenager may talk about an 'old guy' who, on further investigation, turns out to be 45. An 80-year-old may report the kindness of a young nurse. When this compassionate individual is identified, she is noted to be 45 also. So, 45 can be simultaneously 'old' and 'young'. Through the lens of youth, one's parents are old and maintaining that difference allows space for the development of independence and

individuality. Unfortunately, distancing can also permit and perpetuate stereotyping and ageist humour.

Through my literature review, I discovered the extent of ageism and the destructive effect it can have on victims and my interest became personal. I was looking at my own future and I did not like what I saw. What appears to be crucial is that, if the saying 'you are only as old as you feel' is true, it is important that people are not forced into 'feeling old' or depressed about their age by inaccurate representations on screen. My methodological choice of critical discourse analysis using dispositives was an effective way to analyse these inaccurate representations. The words spoken in films must be understood in conjunction with the action and with the 'things' and props the director chooses to include. Those elements make up the signs that direct the viewer to meaning. Questioning and challenging the signs allows a viewer to find persuasive meanings in what appears to be innocuous. As [Chandler \(2007\)](#) says, 'To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the worlds of meanings which we inhabit' ([p.11](#)).

What might be considered by some to be a weakness of the thesis is that the methodology invited me to be subjective as I unpacked meanings from the myriad signs in the chosen films. Clearly, however, this subjectivity is also the strength of the work because it forced me to critically-reflect, question and challenge my assumptions about ageing. There is no correct reading of the signs. Even if I could question a director about what he or she meant by something in the film, the answer, though interesting, would be irrelevant. As [Barthes \(1968\)](#) might have put it, 'the director is dead' because as soon as the film leaves the studio the audience members find their own interpretation. It is hoped that this thesis, as a discursive analysis of media representations of age and ageing, will contribute to the discourse on this subject and play a part in inciting change.

From the personal to the professional: changing attitudes, perceptions and education

In my role as a member of the accreditation team of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, I visit universities and education providers who offer programs leading to registration as a nurse. As part of the accreditation process, I interview many nursing students about the education programs in which they are enrolled. An area of particular interest is the students' professional experience placement (PEP). Australian universities must provide students in a Bachelor of Nursing program with a minimum of 800 hours clinical placement in a variety of appropriate clinical settings. A program leading to registration as an enrolled nurse must include a minimum of 400 hours PEP. As I noted in

Chapter 1, students often complain about being allocated an aged care placement. They claim that there is nothing much to learn there; that such placements merely involve helping with activities of daily living and taking old ladies to bingo. Some students say they cannot practice their newly-acquired nursing knowledge and ‘essential’ skills in an aged care setting. When asked to elaborate on which skills they mean, they refer to giving injections and managing intravenous infusions. The skills of assessment, communication, medication management, encouraging and facilitating independence and liaising with families are diminished in importance in their minds when compared to using technology.

Working in aged care after registration is seen by students to be a career-limiting choice ([Curtis, 2011](#)). Newly-graduated nurses are well-placed to influence the direction of the profession as they bring fresh perspectives. If attitudinal change towards the care of ageing clients can be fostered in nurse education, new graduates will spark changes in their workplaces. Aged care could become a sought-after graduate placement instead of the ‘wooden spoon’ of the available positions. For this strategy to be effective it will be necessary to challenge and disrupt inaccurate assumptions that students might have about ageing, which is why I want to focus on the area of nurse education. I concur with Professor Andrew Robinson who is struggling with the question of how to educate future nursing professionals about the value of the aged care experience, when he says that ‘to address these kinds of [negative] views you need to make it meaningful and you need to make it interesting’ ([Curtis, 2011, p. not available](#)). In the next section of this chapter I will suggest ways in which nursing curricula could incorporate critical awareness of media (mis)representations of age and ageing.

Raising critical awareness through the nursing curriculum

Current accreditation standards ([ANMAC, 2012](#)) for programs leading to nursing registration in Australia require that teaching and learning address the application of critical thinking frameworks (Standard 2.4 (d)) ([ANMAC, 2012, p.12](#)) and the promotion of emotional intelligence and ethical practice (Standard 2.4 (i)) ([ANMAC, 2012, p.12](#)). Standard 4.4 (a) requires nursing curriculums to ‘support the application of knowledge and skills in critical thinking, analysis and problem solving’ ([ANMAC, 2012, p.14](#)). And Standard 5.13 stipulates that by the completion of the nursing program a student must successfully complete a summative assessment against the national competency standards for registered nurses ([ANMAC, 2012, p.15](#)). As the National Competency Standards require registered nurses to take action to prevent discriminatory behaviour, it follows that a nurse cannot adhere to discriminatory attitudes, beliefs or behaviours her/himself. By developing critical thinking and analysis, as required by the standards, and applying that critical analysis to the issue of ageism,

education providers would be ensuring that their graduates understand the imperative for reflecting on their attitudes towards age and ageing.

The use of film in nursing education is not a new concept. [Hyde and Fife \(2005\)](#), for example, described using films with themes of psychological and neurological illnesses to teach nursing students in a mental health program. [Hyde and Fife \(2005\)](#) describes the use of film, combined with group work, as a 'constructivist' tool for students to describe symptoms and behaviours, as represented in the selected films. The theory of constructivism ([Hyde & Fife, 2005, p.95](#)) posits that meaning and knowledge are constructed through activity. Using films to demonstrate what an illness is like implies a certain amount of agreement that the representation is accurate and valid. When the representation of a concept is ambiguous (or plain wrong) – as can be seen in film portrayals of ageing - a deeper analysis approach is needed. My proposal is that students need to critically-analyse representations to question and resist what they have seen.

The methodology of critical discourse analysis used in this study is an excellent research skill for students to acquire. Understanding that the screen world is not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality is a key concept. Visual representations are 'never innocent or neutral reflections of reality ... they offer not a mirror of the world but an interpretation of it' ([Midalia, 1999, p.131](#)). The stereotypical portrayal of nurses might be a good place for educators to start. Nurses are often portrayed as subservient to doctors and not very bright. The image of the female 'naughty nurse' - her uniform popping open under the pressure of her well-endowed chest - endures in films, postcards and cartoons. Male nurses hardly feature at all. Encouraging students to take a questioning stance about representations in film promotes the development of critical thinking skills that are essential for discerning best practice in nursing. When students begin to question the images presented to them, they will find film and television has influenced and shaped public opinion on a vast array of topics, including how the public views the nursing profession.

When considering ageing and ageism, a range of films or scenes from films should be offered to nursing students for analysis. It is not the quality of the film that matters, more its availability and popularity. Ageing 'facts' could be used in 'compare and contrast' exercises. For example, students could consider why older women in the real world outnumber men, but disappear in the screen world. Students would need to investigate all aspects of ageing so they are aware of what 'really happens' in later life. The value of critical analysis lies not only in critiquing representations in film but has broader application to all the discursive practices that nurses encounter ([Crowe, 2005](#)). Nursing practice is shaped by texts of all kinds, from scholarly journal articles to the 'call to arms' in material published by nursing unions. Nurses in specialty areas, such as stoma care or diabetes clinics, are exposed to product pamphlets which, under the

cloak of information, are really advertising material designed to persuade practitioners to recommend certain pharmaceutical products. Even pens and stress balls with company logos are part of the discourse. Nurses can be discerning about the material they distribute to clients if they critically-analyse all texts and objects.

Critical analysis empowers nurses to resist inducements to stock certain pamphlets or use particular dressings. As a result, clients will be the ultimate beneficiaries when nurses use critical awareness to act as advocates for clients, not as tools of pharmaceutical organisations ([Springer & Clinton, 2013](#)). Teaching students to be critical of the discourses to which they are constantly exposed will allow them freedom to form their own opinions in the workplace and about stories they see or hear in films, on television, in newspapers and through advertising and politics. They will make decisions about where they stand on issues rather than subscribing to the most persuasive rhetoric. As Morpheus says to Neo in the movie, Matrix ([Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999](#)) 'I'm trying to free your mind, Neo. But I can only show you the door. You're the one who has to walk through it'. Teaching critical discourse analysis is showing students the door to another mode of enquiry.

Opening students' eyes to the biases and stereotypes within and around them will positively influence clinical practice as well as personal reflection skills. To better illustrate this point, I use the example of later life sex and sexuality. Many students may be confounded to learn that it is usual for older people to continue to enjoy sex. They will find that films they view do not reflect this reality. If students hold the mistaken belief that 'old people don't have sex' they will consider taking a sexual history as 'not applicable'. It may very well be applicable. Leaving out sexual history can mean partners are not accommodated in aged care facilities and lead to erroneous assumptions about sexual orientation. Sexual health messages are not delivered. Sexually-transmitted infections can also go undetected or untreated if the sexuality of ageing clients is ignored. If sexuality is not considered during a holistic assessment, older people may come to believe that their sexuality is not normal and become embarrassed. Holistic care or person-centred care 'demands that we recognize older people as sexual beings' ([Nay, McAuliffe, & Bauer, 2007, p.78](#)).

Changing public perception of ageing

Governments around the world are taking steps to promote the concept of positive ageing but attitudinal change will require significant human and financial resources. The idea behind this concept of positive ageing is that people who are healthy in mind, body and emotions will have a happier and more independent old age. The obvious benefit to governments is a reduced healthcare bill, less need for social support and residential care and a population that will remain in paid employment for longer, thus reducing the need to access a

state-funded pension. The governments of Australia, New Zealand, Ireland and Canada have all published reports on positive ageing in recent years ([Department of Health Ireland, 2013](#); [DoHA, 2012](#); [Nova Scotia Seniors' Secretariat, 1995](#); [Office for Senior Citizens, 2001](#)) . In the preamble to the Irish Government's positive ageing strategy, the Minister for Health reminded the Irish public that 'ageing is a lifelong process that does not start at 65 years of age - the choices that we make when young and middle aged will determine how healthy we will be in our old age' ([Department of Health Ireland, 2013, p.4](#)).

Programs to promote positive ageing must emphasise that older people do not conform to stereotypes –positive or negative. Representations of fit-looking older women jogging along the beach accompanied by their silver haired partners can be just as damaging as the image of the lonely hunched figure trying to hold a cup of tea with her gnarled fingers. Old age includes both those images and a myriad of others. The insights from research and literature on ageism suggest that both negative and positive media portrayals of older adults and their health need to be critically-examined ([Giles & Reid, 2005](#); [McHugh, 2003](#)) because reinforcing the distance between different kinds of seniors, or between illness and health, may further de-value and segregate vulnerable older adults ([Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005](#)).

While legislation and-policy making to promote happier and healthier ageing are being developed at a government level, steps can also be taken locally to make a positive difference. When I set out the reasons for undertaking this thesis, I stated that, as a registered nurse, I have an obligation to treat all people equally regardless of age, gender, race, sexual orientation or culture. There is also an imperative for me, and all members of the profession, to act to prevent discrimination, particularly in health care. It is, therefore, towards the nursing profession that I want to direct my efforts at eradicating ageism. Nurses make up the largest number of health care professionals in Australia ([NMBA, 2013](#)) and, as a consequence, are pivotal in the delivery of health care in all settings and to all age groups.

Considerations for further research

My study of representations of age and ageing in comedy film has demonstrated that governments' efforts to address ageism and promote positive ageing are undermined by the persistence of negative and inaccurate portrayals of older people. I found that representations of middle age are under-researched. This cannot be attributed to an absence on-screen of middle-age. On the contrary, mid-life crisis is a popular theme for comedy because some of its alleged symptoms are so easy to portray. Red sports cars and toupees are rich material for comedy. The re-uniting of middle aged friends on some sort of shared mission, be it a road trip or the re-formation of a boy band, provides an ideal frame for comedy scriptwriters to locate their ideas. I consider that further research into middle-age on screen would be valuable in making sense of

the shifting goal posts of ageing, which are moving because of increased longevity. If 50 is the new 40, do the old codes still apply and are these codes reflected on-screen? For example, what are the implications for ageism and ageist attitudes towards new mothers in their 40s or older homosexual couples 'coming out'.

There is also much scope for further analysis of newer media forms. On-line gaming is being scrutinised by some commentators as problematic. In the US, 273 million games were purchased in 2009 by gamers who spend an average of eight hours a week playing ([Federal Trade Commission, 2009](#)). Prolonged exposure to any media source is likely to affect a person's perception of the world. The representation of older characters in games has not been systematically reviewed yet. Should analysis reveal that older characters are stereotypically-represented, a new battlefield will have opened up in the war on ageism.

In 2004, actor Geena Davis founded the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. The Institute is a 'research-based organization working within the media and entertainment industry to engage, educate, and influence the need for gender balance,[and] reducing stereotyping' ([Geena Davis Institute, 2013](#)). Through research, education and advocacy, the Institute appears to be making significant progress towards its goal of eradicating harmful stereotyping and under-representation of women and girls in the entertainment industry. I suggest that a similar body should be set up to address stereotyping and under-representation of older people in film and television. There is certainly much work to be done.

Summary

In this thesis, I have tapped into previous research which demonstrates that representations of age and ageing in the media have an influence on the ways audiences think about older people. Evidence shows that negative or stereotypical representations influence viewers to adopt inaccurate opinions about older people. Erroneous ideas about ageing have led younger people to believe that, as we age, we become deaf, mobility-impaired, asexual, incontinent and confused. Subsequently, maybe even consequently, many older people accept these conditions as inevitable aspects of old age. Such beliefs incubate ageism. By the time a school-leaver enrolls in a nursing program, he or she may have had 18 years of exposure to media influences. Mature-age students will have been exposed to even greater volumes of media images. It is almost inevitable that some ideas about age, gender, race and culture will have developed during that time. I am noting this to emphasise that nurses are subjected to the same influences as other viewers. Nurses and people who choose to study nursing are just as likely to be consumers of media as any other demographic. What is different for nurses, as registered, regulated health professionals, is that accepting stereotypical media representations as accurate can be harmful to professional integrity. Nurses must interrogate the discourse of

ageing served up as entertainment and resist the cruel and inaccurate ways that people are portrayed.

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