

# Journeys Into Night: Agewise Cinematic Constructions in *Cas and Dylan* and *Our Souls at Night*

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## Agewise in the Contemporary Film World

Ashton Applewhite, American writer, activist, blogger and expert on ageism, the author of *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* (2016), remarked in her 2017 TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) series lecture “Let’s End Ageism” that today when the aged population is, according to the United Nations statistics, at its highest level in human history, in most societies, including developing and the developed countries alike, “people are living longer and societies are getting grayer; you read and hear about it on all media platforms and outside of them.” This essay will be about a slice of these platforms tackling cultural narratives involving longevity and ageing—and their subsequently increased visibility on the silver screen. In order to investigate ageing as a marker of life course identities in two cinematic matching and mismatching journeys into ageing, I have chosen two North American movies presented in the past five years, the Canadian-made *Cas and Dylan* (2013) directed by Jason Priestley and with Richard Dreyfuss and Tatiana Maslany in leading roles, and the US-produced *Our Souls at Night* (2017), directed by Ritesh Batra, featuring in the main roles Jane Fonda and Robert Redford. I am interested to see the ways in which the representation of senior citizens—in the above-mentioned movies all being members of the North American Baby Boomers generation—is challenging the cultural myths of aging through various acts of performativity.

Talking of media platforms, Applewhite brought up the example of the 2017 Best Picture nominations at the American Academy Awards and found that only twelve percent of speaking or named characters in nominated films were aged sixty and up. As she argued, most of them were paradoxically portrayed as “impaired.” As with previous misrepresentations of women, racial and sexual minority groups, a change in regard to a negative, biased filmic representation of seniors as disabled, medicalized, or simply silenced had to occur sooner or later worldwide. Or, as Jane Fonda earlier claimed, this was not really a simple change but rather an ample revolution, a longevity revolution for what Fonda called “life’s third act.” Six years before Applewhite’s empowering speech, the American actress, writer, and political activist had already called for a change in her “Life’s Third Act” TED Conference talk in regard to how ageing was seen at that point in most societies. Fonda said that there had been “many revolutions over the last century, but perhaps none as significant as the longevity revolution” which needs yet to be realized by the society at large because now people are living on average “34 years longer than our great-grandparents did,” which adds

up to “an entire second adult lifetime that’s been added to our lifespan.” Fonda stressed that “yet, for the most part, our culture has not come to terms with what this means” because we are “still living with the old paradigm of age as an arch. That’s the metaphor, the old metaphor.” And the old metaphor is still wrapped under various forms of ageism, coined in 1969 and characterized, as the World Health Organization (WHO) defines it, by discrimination, prejudice, stereotyping and pathologizing on the basis of age; in this sense, ageism has become the new global glass ceiling.

The cultural critic Margaret Morganroth Gullette was among the first to call for distinctive age or ageing studies in the 1990s (Bouson 6), following immunologist Élie/Ilya Metchnikoff’s idea of ageing and longevity from *The Prolongation of Life. Optimistic Studies* (first published in 1908 and then republished in 2004) and, among many other writers in various fields, Simone de Beauvoir’s opinions from her quintessential but largely neglected book, *The Coming of Age* (1970) by challenging the so-called “narratives of decline” (Whelehan in Jermyn 113) pertaining to ageing, and by fighting the “cultural assaults” of ageism in her books, *Aged by Culture* (2004) and the smartly titled *Agewise. Fighting the New Ageism in America* (2011). Gullette labeled ageism after Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963) as a crisis “that doesn’t yet have a name” (emphasis added) by stressing that “[T]he ignorant call it aging, and the enemies make it a scapegoat for others. We must learn to call it ageism, argue that it *is* a crisis, and fight back” (*Agewise* 17). This crisis has been eminent already, not only from direct life facts but quite predominantly from the linguistic realm, especially in English-speaking countries. Critical of the “vast shadowy context of American age culture” (*Aged by Culture* 5, 7), Gullette highlights the fact that

English has an inadequate vocabulary for discussing either age or decline. Like the term “age” itself, “ageism” has too many referents. It’s broad and slippery. Aside from referring to nasty characterizations of older people, it can be used about the serial killer in scrubs who decimates a nursing home. Mortgage vendors who scam older homeowners. The embarrassingly unfunny *Saturday Night Live* skit about “cougars.” The twenty-eight-year-old man in a novel who shrieks at the seventy-year-old narrator, “Crawl back into your hole and die . . . old man.” The drugstore items purring “anti-aging.” The ridiculous tabloid headline, “Look *seven years* younger.” Too many disparate things, at disparate moral levels, fall under the rubric. This level of generality makes ageism deniable: nursing-home murders are rare; realtors defraud people of all ages; the humor and the curse and the products are trivial. (Indeed, someone’s usually ready to defend any of these instances: “That’s not ageism.” Or even make it invisible or tabooed: “Ageism doesn’t exist”). (7)

To counteract such critical situations in real life—and beyond—there have been various anti-ageist talks, papers, and books, civil and political activism amplifying especially in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This joint effort included, among many academic and non-academic forums, the founding of The European Network in Aging Studies (ENAS) in 2010 with the mission to facilitate international collaboration within the study of cultural ageing alongside its North American counterpart

(NANAS) that was established three years later, with both networks publishing as of 2014 the open access online journal *Age, Culture, Humanities (An Interdisciplinary Journal)*. To highlight the current global importance of issues in age and ageing, the World Health Organization has also started its anti-ageism initiative with the global strategy and action plan on ageing and health Resolution WHO 69.3 as of 2016.

In terms of filmic representation of senior citizens, *Aging, Popular Culture and Contemporary Feminism: Harleys and Hormones* (2014) is currently a milestone book on the phenomenon of an increasing number of newly produced films (by big and independent studios alike) that tend to focus on the exploration of various narratives of ageing and its place in a given culture. It seems that these visual forms of longevity representation drew in a “silver tsunami” (Whelehan and Gwynne 2) that has been sweeping over the western film world, producing a “graying” of filmmaking over the past decade or so, with moving images especially celebrating the ongoing zest for life instead of adopting previous cultural scripts on aging as regime of decline. These films challenge aging stereotypes and interrogate essentialisms, directing one’s attention to age as a marker of identity of various golden age life-courses. Such competent and sensibly structured scenarios made in the past decade include, among the two target movies of this essay, many other films and series, such as *The Expendables* (2010), *Sex and the City 2* (2010), *Red* (2010), *Cloudburst* (2011), *Quartet* (2012), *Amour* (2012), *Hope Springs* (2012), *Song for Marion [Unfinished Song]* (2012), *Last Vegas* (2013), *Nebraska* (2013), *4 Länder* (2013), *The Hundred-Year-Old Man Who Climbed Out of the Window and Disappeared* (2013), *Le Week-End* (2013), *5 Flights Up* (2014), *Avis de Mistral* (2014), *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011) and *The Second Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2015), *The Intern* (2015), the Netflix series of *Gracie and Frankie* (2015), *The Second Time Around* (2016), *Book Club* (2018), *Mamma Mia 2: Here We Go Again* (2018), to name some eloquent examples. Moreover, as Imelda Whelehan and Joel Gwynne have claimed, many previous filmic representations of golden-agers refused to critique essentialist notions of gender by showing “how fear about age disrupting gendered distinctions between men and women becomes the basis for ageism” (12) or simply avoided doing so. In the light of the released films in the past decade, this seems to change. The visual realm of North American contemporary visual culture that “colonized romance as the province of the young” (Jermyn 114) is now on its path to revamping agewise plots, mostly in the form of gerontodramas and gerontocoms that resonate with wider audiences not only on the American continent but also on the global scene. In this context, popular culture in general and film in particular

is entirely responsive to the vicissitudes of trend and taste regarding age and ageing, and whilst often cast as conservative, reactive and shoring up ‘traditional’ norms and values, the very business of tapping into winning formulae and representational tropes exposes the cracks and fissures in our comfortable assurances that we know what ageing means and is. (Whelehan and Gwynne 4)

But do we? Or do we simply need to watch more “agefully.”

In *Cas and Dylan* and *Our Souls at Night*, the films I have chosen to investigate, I look for various perspectives on age and ageing and the manner in which age is acted

out in the celluloid world; moreover, I will explore, with the help of Enikő Bollobás's theory of performativity, the narrative assumptions about age and the challenges in its representations in the field of normative age-effects. Performativity, according to Bollobás, "has the ability to signal the borderline, ambivalent and receding between the text and outside it" significantly contributing "to the understanding of the constructedness of the real and the reality of the constructed world and how we can know, if at all, where the boundaries are" (202). In the realm of age representation, to understand the constructedness of the characters ("the real" versus the projected ones) one needs to understand the dynamics at work between the visual-cultural parameters of the intradiegetic or the "constructed world" and the extradiegetic context, that is, the "reality" of the contemporary North American context and to spot the more or less discernable thresholds between these. In these circumstances, it is extremely helpful to hunt for the characters' performances to see the performative aspect of their identity. In Bollobás's formulation, *performance* (with emphasis in the original) is "a particular mode of performativity, characterized by a mimetic replaying of norms and the replaying of ruling ideologies when constructing the subject" while the *performative* aspect (with emphasis in the original) is the one that "refers to another mode of performativity characterized by a resistance to ruling ideologies and the bringing about of new discursive entities in subject construction" (21).

### Performing Agewise in *Cas and Dylan*

The Canadian buddy-comedy-drama and Montefiore-produced film directed by Jason Priestley from a screenplay by Jessie Gabe was released for the Atlantic Film Festival in 2013 and distributed later on, mostly for a limited release and video on demand. Its restrained success was measured mostly on review aggregation websites (for example, the Tomatometer was 4.7 out of 10 on *Rotten Tomatoes*; 32/Mostly negative on *Metacritic*; and on *IMDB* it reached a rating of 6.6 out of 10). As critic Susan Wloszczyna wrote on *RogerEbert.com*, this film "isn't so much a road trip as roadkill," a one-way Trans-Canadian odyssey starting from Winnipeg through the Rocky Mountains and ending in Vancouver, peppered with dashed dreams and last chances where two "incompatible travel mates," coupled with the "makings of generational clash," join in a journey that opens their eyes to various issues in order to accept and respect each other's foibles, age and, ultimately, death. One of them is Dr. Cas Pepper (Richard Dreyfuss), a white-haired, lonely, sixty-one-year-old widowed Winnipeg oncologist with a tight, conservative attire and with a terminal brain tumor; knowing what he has to face soon, he has been contemplating suicide but is unable to write his farewell note due to an unexpected writer's block. He, therefore, decides to drive his orange Volkswagen Beetle to his summer cottage on Vancouver Island to cross the great divide with dignity by leaving behind only a "legacy note." But as Stephen Holden claims, Cas is "bound for the Pacific Coast and a resting place not only for himself but for his dead dog, whose corpse he keeps in a cooler in the back of his car." Dr. Pepper (sic!) is thus on a dual death march and the movie follows his journey into his chosen night. The other character is Dylan

Morgan (Tatiana Maslany), a twenty-two-year-old “flibbertigibbet,” opportunist young woman, a social misfit with a go for broke attitude, “who thinks hanging around hospital wards filled with people in pain is a good way to become a writer” (Wloszczyzna). Moreover, she is an eccentric, talkative figure living with an abusive-aggressive boyfriend whom Cas accidentally hits with his car (when he gives Dylan a ride home after they accidentally meet in the doctor’s hospital) thus finding himself a fugitive from the law. Dylan gladly joins the elder physician and embarks on a testy camaraderie during which she sings, lies, mocks people, shoplifts, smokes, and disrespects Cas to a certain point. And, similar to Cas, she also has a writer’s block and is fit for a voyage of self-discovery.

The combination of two so mismatching people, a free-spirited, hippie young woman, and a grumpy, elderly scientist, both faced with a writer’s block, can only end in a successful inner and outer journey, an unusual endeavor on both sides, especially if age is the central structuring element. As Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera observes in his book on recent American Studies, where he sheds light on the paradigm of “Age” as the new, viable trope that can best surpass transnationalized notions of identity that function as variants of former exceptionalism, in terms of age and ageing

[W]e tend to understand, respect, and appreciate those with whom we share meaningful life events—and this phenomenon creates a sometimes unspoken affiliation that confers a dimension of stability and constancy to a relationship. In the same way that the transnational idea constructs imagined shared histories and underscores them through cultural ceremonies (these would include public rituals that celebrate certain concepts, heroes, values, and so on), Age as a new structure would construct links that bind strangers to one another through a more universal index. (177)

The meaningful life events Cas and Dylan share are of intergenerational and interage matter; however, their encounter bridges even class and gender divides by focusing more on agewise patterns what binds the two characters together than on what separates them: death—and birth (since, as it transpires, fugitive Dylan is pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl and so she becomes a single mother, who ultimately inherits Cas’ waterside retreat as a real home). Dylan at first does not understand, respect or appreciate Cas, but the voyage into the unknown with him creates a kind of affiliation that first converts their initial opportunism into camaraderie and then into a veritable parent-child dyad. The cultural ceremonies they share include running away from their previous life and an ad hoc dining together, peppered with some hitchhiking, when they meet an aging couple suffering from Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases, resetting their stance on human connections. Throughout the entire journey, Cas is aware of his proximity to death and acts agewise while Dylan is not—though she has to finally learn to recognize it, especially when she helps Cas find peace. The invisible presence of death as an agewise trope pervades most of their moments. When Dylan asks about the theme of Cas’s “note,” the latter simply replies “Death. The Theme is death.” Age as a structuring principle that binds these two strangers to each other is made visible in this movie less through the typical iconology of decline ideology of

an elder man (versus a young woman) but rather through the cultural ceremony of an agewise journey—and death/birth as balancing act.

### Performing Agewise in *Our Souls at Night*

In 2017, the young(er)-skewing platform Netflix issued the autumnal romance *Our Souls at Night* directed by Ritesh Batra, written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber, based on the novel of the same name by Kent Haruf (2015) and starring age activist Jane Fonda (who played in *Gracie and Fankie* and in *Book Club* with Richard Dreyfuss, to name only a couple of roles from the inventory of agewise films enlisted previously) and Robert Redford. This was the fourth collaboration between Fonda and Redford, who were both over eighty when the film was produced. The movie had a reasonable box office success; moreover, on the review aggregation websites this movie achieved also quite good scores: the Tomatometer was 7.5 out of 10 on *Rotten Tomatoes*; 69/100 on *Metacritic*; and on *IMDB* it reached a rating of 7.5 out of 10), indicating that a(nother) film on aged people could be a crowd pleaser.

The movie is set in a small town in Colorado and begins with Addie Moore (Jane Fonda) paying a sudden visit to her shy neighbor, Louis Waters (Robert Redford). Addie's husband died long ago, and so did Louis' wife; the two elder people have been alone, living in neighboring houses for decades with their children far away. For years the two, seemingly old-fashioned people had merely greeted each other and lived close by. But for Addie, this type of life becomes uncomfortable and, having nothing to lose anymore, she decides to take on a proactive role inside and outside her home and goes against culturally expected roles. So she knocks on her neighbor's door to finally establish a more viable connection with him. She is tired of being forsaken and is afraid to be alone in the darkness, so she visits Louis with a strange and crushingly sincere proposition: she suggests they spend their future nights together—just lying beside each other. This is how she phrases her heartfelt idea:

“I want to suggest something to you”, she says, with a soft smile on her lips. “It's a... proposal of sorts. Not marriage. It's a kind of marriage-like question, actually, but umm... I'm getting cold feet.” Louis shuffles in his seat and chuckles. “Would you be interested in coming to my house sometime to sleep with me?” He arches his eyebrows. “Did I take your breath away?” “Yeah,” he says. “See... we're both alone. We've been on our own for... for years. And, uh... I'm lonely. I'm guessing you might be, too.” He looks at her, not saying anything. “Louis, it's not about sex. I lost interest in that a long time ago.” Taken aback initially, Louis eventually agrees.

And so they start an encounter of a close kind. During their first night, Addie asks Louis to just talk to her and once they are sitting in bed Louis opens up and tells delicate instances from his life, leading to a liberating discussion. Addie, in turn, tells about her traumatic life after her daughter's death, and the dialogue continues in a series of counseling sessions during which both are unexpectedly candid—except when



Addie, feeling at once safe and secure with Louis in her house, falls instantly asleep after he reaches her bedroom. They become confidants, who, at first, try to hide from the eyes of their neighbors but then decide to make their relationship public. As Xan Brooks has noted, “in the dark, Louis and Addie murmur their secrets and tend their wounds” and “when they step out, hand-in-hand, into the daylight, they look just as beautiful as they ever did;” the pair are a secret for a while, then become a scandal for the people of their town, but suddenly “they’re not news anymore, just another elderly couple pottering down Main Street.” Addie and Louis are first hesitant acquaintances, then vulnerable friends and companions through the night and age to finally become lovers who act like teenagers, especially when they are apart, being connected only through their smartphones. And indeed, as Guy Lodge wrote, “[T]here is a certain irony, however, in the web distributing a film in which the characters themselves take a decidedly circumspect attitude to new technology – at least, until smartphones bring the old dogs closer to the possibilities of the late-night ‘u up?’ text.”

The movie “praises of the basic decency of ordinary American folk in search of a measure of happiness, even as they make choices that go against social norms and make tongues wag” (Young) because of their age. Nevertheless, as Tanul Thakur writes, this movie is “a beautiful tribute to the power of second chances”—and of reinventing lives at any age. The story of Addie’s and Louis’ journey into night(s) is an instance about something that can hardly be defined at any age, about something that exists because it feels right and comforting regardless of social mores, judgment or years passed by an agewise filmic narrative.

### Agewise Journeys into Night

The representation of aged characters, Cas, Addie and Louis in these films focuses on the events of unusual change in their lives and can be best understood through various acts of age performativity connected to those changes. These occur in both films mostly at the borders of the character’s in/visibility within its own life, an intradiegetic narrative setup that exposes a cycle of performativity. For example, Dr. Pepper seems deserted and is thus made invisible at the level of his community (colleagues, patients); he has no family and nobody is calling him up or seeking him out. Nevertheless, in a *performance*<sup>1</sup> attitude characteristic for most of his widowed life, miming his living in the style of “business as usual,” Cas is paying for his wife’s cell phone long after she is gone so that he can have someone to call and to hear her voice, live, over the voicemail box. This act of calling makes him alive and helps him escape a reality that is too harsh to live alone. Moreover, in an act of veritable courage, he decides to give up his secure place in his home and at the hospital (both as doctor and future patient), all this against the commonsense attitude of his generation peers by hitting the road in a *performative*, subversive way: taking his dead pet in a cooler with him to the end of the road adds extra spice to this *performative* aspect. Dylan’s

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1 In the rest of the essay the terms *performance* and *performative* appear like this, applying Enikő Bollobás’s way of spelling them in her cited book.

stance is mostly *performative* before the journey: she resists societal norms and can hardly fit in the mainstream cultural script. Cas and Dylan meet in the space of the fugitive *performatives*: during these events of change the physician cooks pasta sauce for Dylan in a motel and becomes a veritable hippie with a huge, blond wig flowing in the wind after Dylan, realizing Cas's situation, wants to ease his pain by sprinkling a drug into his coffee, thereby making him happy—and howling like a wolf. Cas has a number of other numerous *performative* turns on the road, such as when he writes his final note into a testament through which he leaves his house to Dylan, who finally finds her place in the world. However, the end of the *performative* “road” is death for Cas and partial *performance* for Dylan, who as a single mother, starts complying with societal norms—but does not return to her child's abusive father. The end of the *performative* road for Dylan is the birth of her daughter, who will be brought up in Cas's summer cottage. Both Cas and Dylan are caught in a cycle of performativity that leads them to closures bringing them in balance not only with the age in which they are living but also with their own age.

Addie and Louis, due to their age, are less visible to the people of the city before they decide to “sleep” together, since their presence (or non-presence) and public image melt into the culturally expected scripts of a widow and widower. This is their *performance*: the Colorado octogenarians are “invisible” only while they keep their relationship a secret; then they become quite “visible” as agents of local gossip and scandal when they become *performative*. And then, all of a sudden, they're not news—and *performative*—anymore. These changes in the waves of the “silver tsunami” exhibit a subversive *performative* attitude under the mask of the mimetic replaying of norms, making it a neo-*performative* attitude. And this neo-*performative* attitude of Addie and Louis living together (and next to each other) lasts also after a hospitalization period when Addie moves to her son, Jamie. Although Addie and Louis are miles apart towards the end of the film, they are still close by never ceasing to talk to each other: each night before going to bed, they have intimate discussions on the cell-phone Louis sent Addie as a gift. Through a technological barter in which the smartphone takes the role of bed, the two remain connected by transcending the space between them. And so, the neo-*performative* spirit is nested in for the rest of the intradiegetic narrative—and, in an agewise strategy, perhaps even beyond.

The progress narratives in the two films discussed above are, if summed up, mostly *performative* by dismantling ageism in various ways, and are connected to various rites of passage: an intergenerational dialogue of death and birth in *Cas and Dylan* and the same-generation dialogue of “nuptials” in *Our Souls at Night*. All characters counteract cultural expectations of the old by transcending norms, rules, standards, and even filmic stereotypes. They either combine *performance* and the *performative* in a cycle of performances (Cas and Dylan) or end up with a neo-*performative* stance (Addie and Louis) in their journeys into night across Canada or the US. Cas's cycle of agewise performativity ranges from the last stage of his terminal cancer to an adventurous road trip, and from suicide to dying with dignity; thus he does away with the ageist paradigm of decay as such by dismantling it through his last journey into eternal night. Addie's and Louis's cycles of agewise performativity extends from their culture's social expectations of loneliness and vulnerability through secret meetings and scandal to fitting into



the scripts of unusual romance plots; their journey into nights together roams from fear to pleasure by showing that it is not ageing but, as Applewhite has shown, age discrimination which is the problem in a fluid culture where age is a spectrum from which each can choose its journey. Age performativity in these two movies shows that it is possible to transgress stereotypical or ironical representations of the aged in various cinematic scripts, making these visual stories more about what Bob Stein, one of the founding fathers of the new media, calls in the “A Rite of Passage for Late Life” TED talk, an agewise opening of “a door to whatever comes next.”

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