

## **FEAR OF AGING: OLD AGE IN HORROR FICTION AND FILM**

### **Opening Remarks – 2 pm GMT (Lisbon/London Time)**

João Paulo Guimarães

University of Porto/ILCML (Portugal)

João Paulo Guimarães's research concentrates on contemporary American poetry and science studies. He received a Ph.D. in English from SUNY Buffalo and was an Irish Research Council postdoctoral fellow at University College Dublin from 2018-2020. He works as a Junior Researcher at the University of Porto. His current project, "The Old Garde", investigates how old age is represented in American experimental poetry. In 2020 he organized an online symposium titled "Aging Experiments: Futures and Fantasies of Old Age" and is currently working on an edited collection about that topic. His work has appeared in such venues as *Western American Literature*, the *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, *CounterText* and *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies*.

### **PANEL A – 2:30 pm – 4 pm GMT**

Aging in Circles: A Twilight Portrait of an Aging Lady  
in Richard Matheson's "Night Call" and "Spur of the Moment"

Marta Miquel-Baldellou

University of Lleida (Spain)

The American writer Richard Matheson is mainly best known for his science fiction horror novels *I am Legend* (1954) and *The Shrinking Man* (1956), which were turned into successful motion pictures on different occasions in the span of decades. Matheson's idyll with cinema was endorsed when he wrote the scripts of Roger Corman's memorable series of movies based on Edgar Allan Poe's tales. As a screenwriter, he was also responsible for writing sixteen episodes of Rod Serling's pioneering television series *The Twilight Zone*, featuring narratives of science fiction and horror that came to a close with a chilling unexpected end. In the last season of the original series, which was broadcast in 1964, Matheson contributed two episodes, "Night Call" and "Spur of the Moment", which consist of horror narratives that, through the subversion of time boundaries, explicitly address aging and the anxieties that can be associated with old age and the aging process.

“Night Call”, based on Matheson’s short story “Long Distance Call”, presents Elva, an aging lady who starts receiving mysterious calls from a stranger that soon begin to stir latent memories from her past. Conversely, “Spur of the Moment” introduces Anne, a young girl pursued by an aging lady dressed in black who comes to warn her and disturb her apparently alluring future. By means of narratological devices pertaining to the horror genre, these two episodes present an ambivalent portrait of aging and subvert the audience’s expectations owing to popular beliefs which associate youth and age with determinate values and features. A comparative analysis of these two episodes will serve the purpose of presenting Matheson’s reflections upon the fears that the discourses of aging may bring about in two audiovisual narratives belonging to the horror genre.

Dr. Marta Miquel-Baldellou is a member of ENAS (European Network of Aging Studies) and, as an affiliate of the research group Dedal-Lit of the University of Lleida, she is currently taking part in a government-funded research project on aging and creativity. She has attended ENAS conferences, contributed chapters to different volumes of the Aging Studies Series of Transcript Verlag, and published in ENAS official journal *Age, Culture, Humanities*. In the field of aging studies, she is particularly interested in the analysis of age performance in classic films and of aging discourses in popular fiction.

Is She a Witch or Just an Old Woman? The Monstruous Old Woman in Bedtime Story

(dir. Lucas Paulino and Ángel Torres, 2019)

Eva Álvarez-Vázquez

University of Massachusetts Amherst (USA)

In our Western capitalist society, people are valued for their capacity for production and work, as well as for their purchasing power, associated with the privilege of independence and individuality. As a consequence, our society denies aging and makes it invisible, as it is perceived as a decline associated with negative ideas of decadence, dependence, unproductivity, illness and disability. Ageism is even more evident in the case of women, what Kathleen Woodward has referred to as “double aging” or “multiple aging” (1999). Although aging is something that affects us all—not only biologically, but also on a sociocultural level—, representations of old women in cinema are scarce or relegated to secondary roles and often subject to established stereotypes, especially within the comedy genre. On the other hand, horror movies also constitute a space in which older women are frequently represented and have agency, even playing lead characters, although framed in a series of very restricted and clearly identifiable archetypes that represent an unconventional femininity manifested in monstrous, abject bodies. Thus, in the last decade, a fully human-looking old woman has been a recurring figure in horror films. This is the case of *Bedtime Story* (dir. Lucas Paulino and Ángel Torres, 2019), a recent Spanish short horror

movie which tells the story of two brothers who live in front of an old woman who seems to be watching them from her window continuously. Drawing from the theoretical formulations on “The Monstrous-Feminine” developed by Barbara Creed (1993) and recently expanded by Erin Harrington in *Gynaehorror* (2018), I will illustrate how this film continues to reproduce the negative ideas of decadence and abjection associated with aging female bodies and perpetuates the narratives of fear of aging in our society by constructing monstrosity around the figure of an old woman.

Eva Álvarez Vázquez earned her B.A. in English Studies from the Universidad de Oviedo and her M.A. in European Literature and Second Language Teaching from the Universidad de Huelva. She is currently a PhD student and Teaching Associate in the Spanish and Portuguese Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is also pursuing a Graduate certificate in Film Studies. Her research interests include Iberian cinemas, cultural studies and gender studies.

Elisabete Lopes

Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal

ULICES/University of Lisbon (Portugal)

Adam Robitel’s *The Taking of Deborah Logan* (2014) is a horror film which documents the story of Deborah Logan, a woman who is in an early stage of Alzheimer’s disease. Mrs. Logan lives with her daughter, who is her fulltime caregiver. Due to the fact that they need financial aid, they both accept to participate in an academic study about mental disease carried out by a PhD student who, together with her audiovisual crew, come to dwell with the family in order to record the daily life of Mrs. Logan. What renders this film original is the way in which the theme of possession is used so as to portray the symptoms brought about by Alzheimer’s disease, such as progressive memory loss and gradual deterioration of the capacity to control bodily basic functions, an aspect that is quite innovative when it comes to horror cinema. As the title of the film aptly suggests, the viewer watches Deborah Logan being “taken away”, thus becoming increasingly divested of her original identity and personality traits by some force – disease or demonic possession- meaning that the person Deborah used to be is gradually being replaced by someone who is different and displays an odd type of behaviour. In this sense, Robitel’s film has paved the way for a cinematic tradition which focus on the effects of degenerative mental illness associated with a certain age in women, a fact that transforms the feminine natural process of ageing into something horrific. More recently, films such as M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Visit* (2015) or Natalie Erika James’s *Relic* (2020), followed on the footsteps of the trail left by Robitel’s fearful visual tale. Thus, artfully combining supernatural horror with found-footage technique, *The Taking of Deborah Logan* bluntly tackles both feminine physical and psychological decline medically associated with Alzheimer’s disease, and ends up turning Deborah into a monstrous mother that inspires fear and helplessness upon those who are around her.

Elisabete Lopes is an English Professor at the Polytechnic Institute of Setúbal, and a researcher at the ULICES (University of Lisbon Centre for English Studies /School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon), since November 2015. She holds a MA in English Studies and a PhD in the field of North-American Literature. Both her MA and PhD theses examined the feminine within the Gothic/Horror framework. The Gothic genre, Horror cinema/literature, and Women Studies have been privileged areas of research and publication in the course of her academic career.

## **PANEL B – 4:30 - 6 pm GMT**

“There’s No Cure: Representations of Old Age in Horror.”

Ahoo Tabatabai and Kaydee Anderson

Columbia College (USA)

The representation of older adults in horror is unique in that the anxieties and fears reflected to the audience are sometimes the result of real biological processes blended with the paranormal. We propose that old age is a carrier-vessel for various social fears. The othering of the aged is reinforced through this process and a fear of a loss of agency is perpetuated for the viewer. Old age has often been read as a symbol for the decaying body and death. The aged are often shown as being in extreme biological decline, the body presented as having betrayed itself. Culturally speaking, the aged are often depicted as incapable, forgetful, unproductive, and burdensome. In horror, the aged are permitted to act with intent, nefarious or otherwise. This dissonance created between a stereotypical older adult and the aged portrayal in horror, make it sometimes difficult initially to determine if the older adult should be considered a threat. Old age in horror is more than representations and assumptions of the aged body, however. We propose that old age is today a marker of failure. Our current cultural narrative privileges productivity and personal responsibility. Old age is the opposite of both. Old is dependent. Old is unproductive. The old person with its connection to imminent death is a “half ghost”. The ghost does not produce anything and the fear it instills in others is categorically unproductive. The story of why the ghost is motivated to haunt is often presented as unconvincing – symbolic of the fear of perpetually being stuck in a loop of unproductivity.

Ahoo Tabatabai received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Cincinnati. She is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Psychology and Sociology at Columbia College in Columbia Missouri. Her scholarship and teaching interests include the study of narratives and identity. Her work has been published in *Disability and Society*, *Narrative*

Inquiry, Qualitative Sociology, and Sexualities. She currently serves on the editorial board of Sociological Focus.

Kaydee Anderson studies the occurrence of ageism in medical settings. She is pursuing her masters degree in Sociology at the University of Missouri – Kansas City, where she serves as a Graduate Teaching Assistant. Most recently, she has worked for the Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development as a representative for the Trade Adjustment Assistance program. She enjoys film analysis.

### Old Age between Horror and Leisure – aboard The Leisure Seeker

Shlomit Lir and Liat Ayalon

Bar Ilan University and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Israel)

This study focuses on the question of fear of ageing through analyzing Paolo Virzi's *The Leisure Seeker* (USA, 2017) a film whose plot follows an older couple who travel from Massachusetts to Florida in a camper trailer. While old age in movies is often discussed in medical or in care-giving terms, this film's narrative of coping with dementia and old age is presented from the personal viewpoint of John and Ella Spencer (Donald Sutherland and Helen Mirren) - a Massachusetts couple who have been living together for over fifty years, and who struggle to ward off concerned family members and their plans of transferring one or both of the spouses to a care home. The film focuses on the relationship between an older couple at the closing stages of life, where the male protagonist, John, has dementia, and the health of the female protagonist, Ella, is in decline. The aspect of fear is vividly presented with regard to the protagonist's dementia, the possible breakup of the couple and the possibility of being forced into a nursing home. The space opened up by masculine infirmity that the movie presents exposes unspoken social taboos, reveals marital secrets, and, significantly, lays bare the threads that hold the couple together and determine the power relationship between the two. The discussed film therefore echoes the understanding of dementia as a socio-political familial debilitation rather than narrowly an individual physical and mental condition and therefore as a state that introduces new opportunities, and not only difficulties. While the film explores aspects of horror and fear related to dementia, disease and old age, it also questions the issue of liberty and the pursuit of happiness in later stages of life.

Dr. Shlomit Lir is a Post-Doctoral Researcher at Bar Ilan University, Israel Her research focuses on gender, communication and culture. She is particularly interested in how various social groups represent themselves and are depicted in cultural and digital spheres. Dr. Lir has published on these topics in central journals in Sociology and Communication, including *Israeli Sociology* and *Equality Diversity & Inclusion – International Journal*. In addition to her academic work, Dr. Lir

is a social activist and the founder and CEO of Women Activists Online, a hub initiative designed to promote women leadership through social media.

Prof. Liat Ayalon is a researcher in the School of Social Work, at Bar Ilan University, Israel. Prof. Ayalon seeks to promote awareness of ageism, in order to create change at the political and social levels. She is also a member of the World Health Organization (WHO) global campaign to counter ageism and is one of the SAPEA work group members responsible for the report concerning the future of ageing, which was produced for the European Commission. At Bar-Ilan, she directs a research lab on psychosocial aspects of aging. Her research focuses on the interface between formal caregiving and informal care provided by family and friends for older people, and on ageism. Prof. Ayalon completed her PhD in Clinical Psychology at the Illinois Institute of Technology and pre- and post-doctoral training at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF). She has published nearly 200 articles in leading journals. She is the recipient of several international awards, most recently from the University of Michigan, The American Geriatrics Society, and the International College of Geriatrics.

Twilight Zones of Human Existence: The Care Home as a Site of Gothic Horror in North American Film and Fiction

Ulla Kriebeneegg

University of Graz (Austria)

In literature and film, the care home often serves as a symbol, a spatial metaphor for the experience, fears, and uncertainties associated with old age. Used as a setting or spatial frame, the care home illustrates the marginalized social position of the “fourth age,” a period in life Haim Hazan called a “twilight zone of human existence” (94). The threat of ending up as inmates of the “‘halfway houses’ between society as we know it and the cemetery” (Garvin and Burger 11) has been mirrored in literary texts since the late 1960s and has become increasingly common up until today. The genre of the care-home novel is currently flourishing, reflecting the wide variety of care-giving models that range from prison-like, infantilizing, and even abusive institutions to hotel-like retirement facilities with luxurious amenities and responsible caregivers. However, texts depicting the home as a place of confinement still dominate the market. The “horrible home,” with its parallels to the Gothic novel and the sublime, has become a predominant topos in literary texts, while fiction and film that reflect the increasing variety of today’s eldercare options, including its positive sides, have only slowly begun to appear. Since the emergence of the public old age home in the early decades of the twentieth century, theories of aging as well as concepts of care-giving have changed, yet the “nursing home specter” still lingers on in the collective memory of North American societies. This paper focuses on cultural representations of the care home as a site of gothic horror, including Eudora Welty’s short story “A Visit of Charity,” Joe Lansdale’s story and film “Bubba Ho-Tep”, or Melanie Tem’s “The Tides.” It aims at taking cues from the texts to think

about what they reveal regarding societal fears of aging, and how the quality of care in the “fourth age” can be improved.

Ulla Kribernegg is director of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Aging and Care (CIRAC) and Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz. Her emphasis in research and teaching are North American literary and cultural studies, Aging and Care Studies, and Medical Humanities. Her latest book, *Putting Age in its Place* (forthcoming) focuses on the spatiality of care in cultural representations of care homes in North American film and fiction. Ulla is chair of the Age and Care Research Group Graz and deputy chair of the European Network of Aging Studies (ENAS). She co-edits the Aging Studies book series (Transcript) and is a member of the GSA’s Humanities, Arts, and Cultural Gerontology Panel and a Fellow of the Trent Centre for Aging & Society, Canada. Ulla has taught internationally (USA, Trinidad & Tobago, Cuba, Uruguay) and has won several teaching and research awards.

#### **KEYNOTE – 6:30 pm GMT**

Laura Hubner

University of Winchester (UK)

*Beyond the Horror of the Ageing Female: Decay, Regeneration and Relic* (Natalie Erika James, 2020)

Laura Hubner is Professor of Film and Media at the University of Winchester, UK. She is author of *Fairytale and Gothic Horror: Uncanny Transformations in Film* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) and *The Films of Ingmar Bergman: Illusions of Light and Darkness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), co-editor of *The Zombie Renaissance in Popular Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and *Framing Film: Cinema and the Visual Arts* (Intellect, 2012), and editor of *Valuing Films: Shifting Perceptions of Worth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Her next monograph launches the book series she is editing, *Iconic Movie Images* (Winchester University Press).