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“Animating Grandma: the indices of age and agency in contemporary children’s films.”

Author: Elizabeth Parsons
(lecturer in literary studies) Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia.

Email: liz.parsons@deakin.edu.au

Surface mail:

c/o Faculty of Arts
Deakin University
221 Burwood Hwy
Burwood 3125
VIC
Australia.

Phone: International: +61 3 9244 6472

Fax: International: +61 3 9244 6755

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Abstract:

Analysis of three animated children’s films, each with heroic grandmothers motivating their plotlines, suggests a shift in the representational politics mediating older women to child audiences. The films function as critiques, reflections and mechanisms of contemporary capitalism’s available socio-cultural locations for older women, modelled through varying degrees of subversive performance. Interrogating the agency potential of housework, nurture and extreme sports, this article assesses the role and function of the “Granny trope” in contemporary children’s media.

Keywords:

grandmothers, children’s animated film, agency, capitalism

Animating Grandma: the indices of age and agency in contemporary children's films

As the widest example of the generation gap, relations between older people and children offer ways in which cultural cohesion across age barriers can be enacted, modelled, and promoted. In texts for children, wizened old men traditionally give significant advice and support from a position of status and knowledge gained through experience. Dumbledore in the Harry Potter series is a case in point, but the roles for old women are far less positively rendered. Crones are usually malefactors (often witches), while grandmothers tend to offer passive nurturance through a kind acceptance of the youthful protagonist's hopes and fears. Three recent animated films for children demonstrate a shift in these logics of representation with alternative narrative tactics that invite audiences to see older women as heroic. This filmic debunking of preconceptions about the aged female body -- as either (frighteningly) grotesque, or sweet and gentle to the point of inconsequence -- suggests burgeoning new relations between children and older women, most commonly their grandmothers.

Spanning three national cultures, US Blue Yonder Film's recent revision of Red Riding Hood, *Hoodwinked* (2005), French-Canadian Sylvain Chomet's *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003) and world-renowned Japanese director, Hayao Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), all foreground grandmothers who motivate and participate in children's adventures. The stories each enact their age-centred politics in profoundly different ways that are arguably indicative of the cultural variances in their nations of production. This article interrogates animations of grandma as a media form in cartoon style, and as a model of aged agency using the framework of children's fiction analysis. Children's

literature theory critiques the (always ideological) socialising agendas typically operating in stories produced by adults for child consumption (Stephens, 1992). An examination of the anti-ageist and feminist implications of the grandmother trope at the beginning of the twenty-first century exposes media trafficking of grandmother characters as exemplars of a social location. To ask of these films the question Madame Souza asks her grandson in *The Triplets of Belleville*, “What have you got to say to Grandma? Hmmm?” raises the more important question, ‘What have you got to say *about* Grandma?’.

The range of potential responses to these questions share a significant dynamic, one that responds most profoundly to embodied understandings of agency. Despite existing at opposite ends of the age spectrum, children and their grandmothers are similarly perceived (in adult-centric societies) as limited in their physical and (often) intellectual capabilities. In earlier research I have examined picture books wherein this assumed lack of competence means that older characters can reflect children’s sense of difficulty in manipulating a world that is predominantly designed for, and controlled by, adults (Parsons, 2006).

This embodied position extends into broader socio-political locations. As Bryan Turner explains, both older people and children suffer from the same ‘politics of resentment’ in capitalist cultures given that they are financially dependent on the economic productivity of the adult labor force (1989). The resentment is arguably more profound for older women than men given that women of earlier generations were often exempt from (or forced out of) the paid labor force as they tended to child-rearing and thus have not been

earners in ways that might mitigate such resentments in the form of a culturally-sanctioned golden handshake principal. My examination of these three films is necessarily embedded in such economic frames given that the unpaid and demeaned work that women contribute as labor, housework, is central to my argument. Because housework does not increase a woman's value, my discussion therefore intersects with the other significant economy in which women trade, but from which grandmothers are (for the most part) excluded, beauty, or more specifically, sexual desirability.

Youthful beauty as the binary opposition to aged unattractiveness is cleverly shifted in *Howl's Moving Castle*, whereby the protagonist is an adolescent girl called Sophie who is cursed by a witch and turned into an old woman. As a youthful mind housed in an aching and weakened body she goes off into the world, rescues two beautiful young men, who then adore her, and inadvertently ends the war that is raging in her country. While her old-age is given to her as a curse, Sophie is not overly upset by the transformation and phlegmatically comments that at least her unfashionable clothes now suit her. She is somewhat Cinderella-like in being the plainest sister, but Miyazaki revises that archetypal plot by showing Sophie refusing offers to dress up and go out to try and find the handsome-prince figure, Howl, when the pretty girls invite her to join them.

Sophie finds instead that physical expression of female old age can be turned to advantage when it is annexed to a "good" main character. In her crone form she is taken to be a witch, a misnomer that she embraces in order to trade in the frightening power that witches can wield. But her real (rather than fantasy) powers are those typically

associated with the Grandma she also calls herself – she transforms her world in two key ways, through loving nurture and through housework. On the surface, this logic is open to critique as a limited depiction of what women can do, and moreover, what older and no-longer sexually desirable women are reduced to as representative of typical cultural patterns. That said, by refiguring these conventional grandma behaviours as powerful, magical, heroic and successful, the film transcends the problems associated with feminist bids to show women as empowered only if they succeed at traditionally masculine tasks. It is arguably a highly dubious brand of feminism that suggests that women can only be valued as measured by masculinity as a benchmark.

Further, the film makes considerable feminist headway in redistributing kindness, nurture and housework across the gender divide so that it is not simply older women who are given the limited role of love and home-duties. Having run away from home, Sophie wheedles her way into the moving castle by saying that she is the new house-keeper for Howl, his fire-demon Calcifer and his boy apprentice Markl. She makes this pronouncement when Howl arrives home as she is in the middle of cooking a hot breakfast for Markl. Howl accepts Sophie's presence but immediately steps in to finish cooking the meal for all of them in a gesture that suggests he sees this work as his responsibility, and also that he has been remiss.

Later in the film, Sophie instigates a laundry-washing day and is helped by Markl and an enchanted male scarecrow figure called Turnip Head (the cursed form of the second handsome prince figure). As she tires, Markl takes over the task and calls out to Sophie

that he has put all the washing away while she rests, sitting on a deck chair and enjoying the view. This equitable distribution of domestic work not only valorizes tasks that have been traditionally devalued as the province of housebound and unattractive women, it shows them as the responsibility of all members of the household regardless of age or gender. Hank and Jurgens' 2007 study assesses the distribution of household labor between older couples in a range of (more and less gender progressive) European countries. The authors agree with earlier research indicating that "gender...is [still] the single most important determinant of the division of household labor" (p. 401). They also cite studies with a less specific age focus in order to demonstrate that even in the most progressive nations "men generally contribute at most one third of 'core' housework tasks" (p. 400).

Sophie's transformation of Howl's castle through concerted housework is deemed powerful and also has productive social value in that she makes this collection of individuals a family unit. But neither is Sophie easily cast in a biologically essentialist role as the only nurturer. In her initial cleaning frenzy she causes Calcifer significant stress by removing him from the hearth in order to clean it and is admonished by Howl who highlights the importance of caring for others as equally a male province. The moment is typical of Miyazaki's even-handedness, such that Howl's apparent care in this gesture is counterbalanced in that he is also the most vain (and beautiful), selfish, and superficial character in the film, and the one who learns to change his ways so as to put others before self-gratification.

In a further indication of Miyazaki's even-handed representational strategies Sophie takes into the Howl household the very witch who cursed her, the wicked witch of the waste, multiplying the older women in the frame. When yet another witch, Madam Suliman, destroys the wicked witch's power, she becomes ancient because she is forced into the body of her true age (she had used magic to maintain her more youthful, although corpulent, appearance). In this state of decrepitude Sophie takes pity on the wicked witch and brings her home to live in the castle where she behaves selfishly and almost destroys Howl but also enacts some rescues and helps to save the day. Between them, these two women demonstrate that old age can be horrendously ugly and negative, but it has its own advantages that happily ever after attests to. In Miyazaki's balancing act, old women can be powerful and weak, positive and negative, nurturing and selfish, maligned and loved; in short, they can not be simply categorized or stereotyped, and they can not be dismissed as fantasy malefactors embodied by evil witches. Nor are they invisible in the mediascape (Appadurai, 1990), meaningless, or without agency, as is typical in western depictions of old women as harmless (read powerless) nurturers.

The film has as much in common with *The Triplets of Belleville*, as it has in differences. Again, the older women span a range of representations that resist stereotyping of age. Everyone grows old except Madame Souza, who is grandmother at the beginning through to the end but who is also the motivating force of the narrative and undeniably the hero. The film begins with Mme Souza worried about her unhappy grandson, Champion, whose parents appear to be dead so that she is his parent as well as his grandmother. Housework is again the force of power and transformation in this story, such that while

making Champion's bed she discovers his secret desire for a bicycle in a scrapbook under his mattress. She procures a bike and then supports his obsession with cycling unfailingly by becoming his personal trainer. She transmutes her knowledge of housework to succeed by using domestic tools like egg-beaters and vacuum cleaners as massage instruments to ease his muscle pain after their grueling training sessions together, and a cutlery fork as a tuning fork to straighten the spokes of his wheels. As a result of their mutual commitment to a training regime, Champion becomes a leading competitor in the Tour de France bicycle race but is then kidnapped by the bad guys so that his talents can be exploited in an underground cyclist betting ring in New York.

As with *Howl's Moving Castle* it would be easy to read Mme Souza as subjugating her life to supporting Champion's desires as is expected of women, and particularly of older women who are considered no longer in a position to use their attractiveness to catch a husband, and thus to see the film as highly gender regressive. But Champion is not the filmic focus; he simply provides the quest that Souza undertakes with the commitment of a coach who puts an underdog team through their paces so that they win the grand final. Viewers never see Champion win; they only see Souza succeed in rescuing him as the climax of the filmic narrative. In this way the film enacts some fabulous feminist logic in indicating that working collaboratively for a goal is a success worth pursuing and that an individualized self-aggrandizement is not the only way by which to measure self-worth in this profoundly neo-liberal age in which 'looking out for number one' has become a sanctified life-goal.

Equally like *Howl's Moving Castle* is that older women characters proliferate in number. With her aged dog Bruno following the scent, Mme Souza sets off to rescue Champion from his slavery in New York. Here the aged pair team up with three more older women, the triplets of the title. The opening frames had shown these three as youthful, glamorous, 1920s flappers performing their spectacular cabaret song on television. In the action of the filmic adventure, however, they are the age of grandmothers and perform their creative prowess, as Mme Souza does, by positively deploying the signifiers of domesticity – a vacuum cleaner, a refrigerator and an old newspaper that they have turned into musical instruments in order to keep performing their show.

That these domestic items, so culturally linked to women's work, and the only work that no longer sale-ably attractive performing women can use, become tools of social participation enacts the same skillful refiguring of denigrated existence into success that housework allows for Sophie. These three support Mme Souza and Bruno in their quest to rescue Champion and are wildly and hilariously successful. They also actively challenge capitalist logics embodied by the men who have kidnapped Champion in order to make money. Their poverty is, like their age, not a weakness but a means by which to evade evil in the world, when that evil is emblemized by money. These stories show that the practical skills of housework, the unpaid contribution many women make in capitalist economies, encodes within it immense power as heroic and artistic forces of change. But, is this just a fantasy?

There is no doubt that animation as a form allows for fantasies to function because the medium is easily manipulated so that characters and events can exist outside the norms of physical possibility for older women in the real world. In children's texts, fantasy commonly resolves the issues of agency by giving ostensibly weak child protagonists special powers that allow them to transcend limitations, both real and socially imposed, in adult-centric societies. I refer again to Harry Potter as the most well-known contemporary example in children's literature of this mechanism. What makes *Howl's Moving Castle* and the *Triplets of Belleville* so compelling is that they go some way to debunking the need for such fantasy elements by elevating the status and power of behaviours typically associated with real old women. While these movies certainly draw on the generic freedom in fantasy in that they are conspicuously not-real in their visual representation strategies, and human bodies and other physical entities can be made to move and behave in ways that transcend the limitations of reality, they circumscribe that logic in the feminist and anti-ageist ways via their use of domestic items. This is markedly less the case in *Hoodwinked* perhaps because the US filmmaking industry is more squarely located in late capitalist logic (of which the US is the acknowledged hub). This logic is subverted by the Japanese and French-Canadian movies arguably as indicative of their shared resistance to US cultural imperialism integral to their enacting of national difference.

To this end, only *Hoodwinked* privileges fantasy's generic scope for the physically impossible with such free reign that Red (riding hood)'s grandmother is an extreme sports fanatic in contradistinction to the realities of physical frailty that the aged body

most commonly manifests. There is a comic irony bound up in this depiction whereby, like vegetarian shark characters in other mainstream American animated films (Lenny in *Shark Tale* (2004) and the self-help group of sharks in *Finding Nemo* (2003)), the joke relies on the incongruity. For real-world sharks the biological impossibility of surviving without consuming other fish makes this animated revisioning of sharks a way in which to decommission their dangerous power so that child audiences are invited to laugh at sharks rather than fear them.

Likewise, Granny in *Hoodwinked* is more laughed at than revered in this film's burlesque treatment of her. She suffers from the same brand of "comic relief" that Markson and Tailor identify in Hollywood films for adults that cast older women in key roles (2000, p.151). The film's mockery of old age is heightened by Granny herself when she actively ridicules real-world stereotypes about old ladies, impersonating them by saying "I'm just a tired old lady" and derogating "doilies", "quilting bees" and "bingo parlours". She does not debunk the binary oppositions of youth and age because she is shown as the exception that proves the rule. As she explains to the child audience, "I'm not like other grannies". She does use a muffin tin as a snowboard and her rolling pin as a weapon and a skateboard (before swapping to a BMX), but unlike her counterparts in the other two films, her choice of activities is highly masculinized in western cultures as the domain of daring young men in pursuit of adrenaline. As many scholars including Woodward have noted, aging is a profoundly gendered process heavily weighted against women (1999), making this gesture a particularly overdetermined irony.

The irony is also linked to Hepworth and Featherstone's research on capitalism's privileging of youthful consumption practices that demand the aged subject perform a youthful self (1991, 1991a), here personified by Granny's fascination with seeking thrilling experiences and trophies for winning. Her youthful and consuming subjectivity makes a further mockery of the film's narrative surface which implies a critique of corporate America. The evils of global capitalism seem to motivate this fractured fairytale in a plot beginning with the producers of "goodies" being threatened by a corporate-run franchise that is putting small local producers out of business. Granny (as the agent of irony) disrupts this broader plot's apparent critique of capitalism since she is currently the goody producer with the largest market share (and thus the most to lose). In her younger years she had been such a hugely successful entrepreneur she can now delegate the work of running her business while she enjoys her extreme sports and their associated irresponsibility in what is arguably the second childhood Turner describes (1989). Her wealth is also the reason she can avoid the stigma of dependence because she has previously earned so highly that she can now enjoy the fruits of her success in old age without fear of the aforementioned political resentment.

Unlike the other two films, in which older women increase their agency by working with others, Granny is also the consummate individualist of neo-liberalism. Her pursuits all center around a style of self-fulfillment that amplifies the way aging is denigrated in the west in tandem with the valorization of youth (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991). For younger women, consumption is typically figured through the pursuit of sexual appeal that is usually deemed unacceptable (or impossible) for aged women to achieve, inducing

as sense of failure as the “body beautiful” is progressively eroded. Twigg’s analysis of the role and function of clothing in this ageist cultural practice explains these dynamics in detail (2007).

The freedoms of animation and fantasy could have allowed Granny to appear young and beautiful (in order to facilitate this consumption and embodied value as sexual commodity) without any less “fantasy” than having her appear as an extreme sport legend. Instead, her role seems to reflect broader cultural anxiety about sexuality in older women. The comparison is subtly indicated in the film given that, as a sports legend, Granny has to be closeted (no one knows her secret pleasure) in ways that invoke the slippage between the adrenalin rush of sex and extreme sports. Where grannies and sexual attractiveness might be disturbing, grannies and sport is comic.

The films’ closeting agenda cannot be attributed to a belief that sexually attractive female characters are deemed inappropriate for child audiences. There are plenty of examples of the sexualization of women in animated films, including Lola, the femme fatale in *Shark Tale*, and the dating game scene in *Shrek* in which Snow White is described in these terms: “sure she lives with seven other men but she’s not easy! Just kiss her dead, frozen lips and find out what a live wire she is.” The description doesn’t require much glossing to make apparent the sexual content being sold to child audiences. To resolve the comparison between possibilities for agency enacted across these three female bodies, Sophie wins the love of beautiful young men despite her crone form and Mme Souza is motivated by her one-eyed (mirrored in the visual ploy of the bother her lazy eye causes

her) dedication to training Champion to the exclusion of all else. The triplets are likewise fully satisfied by their relationship with each other. Only *Hoodwinked's* Granny must hide her secret desires from public scrutiny such that it is fitting that the role she is given at the film's close is as a secret agent whose physical appearance means no-one is likely to suspect her extreme powers.

Schwaiger argues, following Sullivan, that “any ambiguity inherent in the reiteration of norms, whether in performing one’s gender or one’s age, can be used to undermine and question the status of these norms, and gradually lead to a change in the cultural perceptions and valorization of older-body subjects through strategically subversive bodily performance” (2006, p.31). The varied strategies of subversive performance examined here indicate precisely these possibilities. All three movies attracted audiences in the western world suggesting that there will be children who have watched the triumvirate. That these films ask child audiences to consider the agency of (their and others’) grandmothers in diverse ways might well have a broader political set of implications via their suggestion of a potential collaboration between children and older people invited by the mediated experience. These films might thus offer a means to subvert or even overthrow adult domination, particularly in societies that are progressively greying. By teaching children that the elderly are powerful, the representations may revert back to the earlier reverence for old age, or they might look forward to new socio-cultural dynamics wherein the elderly hold the socio-cultural numbers in what is likely to soon be a reality in the west. They may therefore be laying groundwork for future models of social cohesion.

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