

COUNTERING AGEIST IDEOLOGY

by Myrna A. Hant

Jennifer Abod's new award-winning film, *Look Us in the Eye: The Old Women's Project*, is a groundbreaking work in women's studies, a video that links ageism and sexism. It is a topic that is rarely studied and even less likely to be filmed. Abod expertly captures the zest of three old women (they specifically want to be called that) who started the Old Women's Project in San Diego in 2000, an organization created for old women activists. The film focuses on interviews with the three founders, Cynthia Rich, Janice Keefaber, and Mannie Garza and shows footage of their demonstrations against war, nuclear proliferation, low-income housing, and many other issues of social justice. The Old Women's Project claims that old women are part of every social justice issue: child care, homelessness, prison reform, violence against women, and war. Too frequently old people are assumed to care only about age-related issues like social security and Medicare. The women's very exuberance and activism, adeptly captured by Abod's film, belie so many of the unexamined assumptions about what older women want and can do. These "truisms" are so pervasive that



deconstructing them is not enough. Abod's visual evidence astutely targets the prevailing ageist ideology: old woman as "other," old woman as invisible, and old woman as a metaphor for disease, isolation, worthlessness, vulnerability, dissatisfaction, and decrepitude.

The entrenchment of ageism, particularly directed at women, has a long history in the United States. Ageism, a term defined by Robert Butler in 1975, is a "process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against older people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin colour and gender. Older people are categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, old fashioned in morality and skills... Ageism allows the younger generation to see old people as different from themselves, thus they subtly cease to identify with their elders as human beings." Ageism is so pervasive in society that we hardly notice any more the ridiculous way older men and specifically older women are portrayed in advertisements, greeting cards, and so often in the media. Cynthia Rich laments the artificial separation of youth and age and challenges people to come together to "join in coalition." She recalls a particular march where she felt she had connected



Cynthia Rich

to a young man as an equal in the cause, both "inhabiting the same world." A year later she happened to see him and his comment to her was "I'm so glad you're still up and around." Rich relayed her shock at the disconnect between her belief that she was his political equal and his ageist comment.

The tainting of the image of older people already begins to appear in the United States in popular literature at the end of the nineteenth century, creating and reinforcing the views that an older person

should be portrayed as declining, feeble, and certainly not mentally alert. Adding further to the denigration of older people is the loosening of beliefs that the elderly are somehow more closely connected to the eternal. "In a society which had lost its fear of the afterlife, and in which awareness and contact with death was not integrated into everyday life (for death no longer held a mythical power over the living) there was no reason to fear any potential revenge from old people."² One of the goals of the Old Women's Project is to make it desirable to be old. "We want to celebrate an honest exchange between generations."

THE OTHER

What does it mean to call someone "the other"? In *The Second Sex*, originally published in France in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir adapted this Hegelian construct to characterize the role of women in male-dominated culture. She explains that man makes himself the essential being and woman is "the other." More specifically, the definition of personhood is male so that woman defines herself in terms of the male. Similarly, the essential being or standard of womanhood

in American culture is youthfulness. Therefore, if a woman is old, she is not essential woman, but rather “the other” and consequently different. Women of all ages know that the standard is youth and to be “not young” is to be devalued by society. The old woman is perceived as menopausal and hence no longer a recipient of the “male gaze.” Moreover, old women adopt this view of themselves and try desperately to be young or at least to “pass” as young, and thus young and old are accomplices in creating a social construct that defines being old as a negative attribute. Simone de Beauvoir laments the “otherness” that forces old people to “stand outside of humanity,” a prisoner of society’s misconceptions. “If old people show the same desires, the same feelings and the same requirements as the young, the world looks upon them with disgust... Above all they are called upon to display serenity: the world asserts they possess it...”³

Betty Friedan also lamented the distortions of society’s images of mature adults. In *The Fountain of Age*, she discusses Vern Bengston’s concerns that older people are so often seen only as a societal problem rather than as creators

of solutions to problems. What are the consequences? It is a tautological bind; the younger members of society do not expect to see active and productive behavior on the part of seniors and in turn old people accept this deleterious stereotype of themselves.

Susan Sontag refers to a “double standard of aging.” In contrast to men, “women are required to match up to the adolescent ideal throughout their lives... It is therefore not surprising that many of our representations of women are constructed in terms of physical appearance and that images and self-images of the bodies of older women cause such problems.”⁴ Frueh concurs that the “older woman is doubly different, doubly degraded, and doubly injured by exterior identity: she is visibly female, different from men and visibly aging, even when cosmetically altered, different from young.”⁵

The other side of aging is the energy and effort put into denying aging by older people themselves and particularly by older women. Old women often internalize the self-loathing so frequently promoted in the ageist stereotype and make valiant efforts to separate them-

selves from the hated “old.” Janice Kee-faber relates her experience of going into stores with her daughter and hearing the unintentional, but derogatory comments by young male clerks: “You two must be sisters” or “Hello, young lady” or “Don’t tell me you’re a grandmother.” As well meaning as the young man thinks he’s being, he is infantilizing old women.

INVISIBILITY

What does it mean to be invisible as a person? The definition of invisible is “incapable of being seen.” To be invisible is to be either the recipient of a totally stereotypical view or actually not to be seen at all. People, particularly men, often ignore old women because they are not young, not a sex object, and not capable of reproducing. The old woman can be only visible and socially acceptable in her prescribed role as mother or grandmother.

“In a youth-oriented patriarchy, especially, to become an older woman is to become invisible, a nonentity.”⁶ According to Naomi Wolf, women’s magazines largely ignore old women, and if they do feature an old

woman, she is air-brushed to look ten to fifteen years younger than she actually is. "The effect of this censorship of a third of the female life span is clear. By now readers have no idea what a real woman's 60-year-old face looks like in print because it's made to look 45. Worse, 60-year-old readers look in the mirror and think they look too old, because they're comparing themselves to some retouched face smiling back at them from a magazine."⁷

This invisibility is piercing for a mature woman not only because she is not worthwhile enough to be visible, but because she enters society's radar screen as a symbol of frailty, weakness, and ugliness. Her major roles are gone, and she becomes merely a manifestation of what a young woman wants to avoid. Germaine Greer explains that "the middle-aged woman no longer has the option of fulfilling the demands of a patriarchal society. She can no longer play the obedient daughter, the pneumatic sex object or the madonna. Unless she consents to enter the expensive, time-consuming and utterly futile business of denying that she has passed her sell-by-date, she has sooner or later to register the fact that she has been junked by consumer culture."⁸

Apparently, millions of women are con-

vinced that if they just try hard enough and buy enough, they will not be "junked." Billions of dollars are spent in an effort to become visible, in other words, to become young again. Age passing becomes a state of mind, a measure of self-worth, a guide to choice. When we reflect "young" tastes in our clothing, cosmetics, activities, friends and lovers, we are passing. "Passing" enables old women to pretend that the key roles that they have grown accustomed to as "object" and "childbearer" are still somehow a possibility. There is even a moral dimension to remaining young, a requirement that a woman's well-being is dependent on her ability (or inability) to stay youthful.

In Abod's film, both Cynthia and Janice lament the stereotypes of old women as either the kindly grandmother or as the cranky, feisty, and difficult old lady. "We are who no one would choose to look at," they remark, but "we need to be defiant about aging and claim ourselves for who we are. And while we're at it we are going to 'claim our white hair and our wrinkles.'"

METAPHOR

Too frequently we see old women as metaphors for disease, isolation, worthlessness,

vulnerability, dissatisfaction and decrepitude. In her book *The Fountain of Age*, Betty Friedan discusses a survey conducted by *Retirement Living* on a cross section of people under and over 65 and the "most common adjectives used to describe the way people over sixty were depicted on television were 'ridiculous,' 'decrepit' and 'childish.'"⁹ In a survey conducted by H. Cohen, participants stereotyped the portrayal of old women as having the following characteristics: living in the past; old fashioned in their behavior, thinking, and the way they looked; not interested in sexual activity; basically cared for by their families without giving in return; and largely invisible.¹⁰

To counter the prevailing assumptions about old women, the Project's women carry their hallmark puppet, a giant woman's head named POWER (an acronym for Pissed Old Woman Engaged in Revolution). Abod's opening and closing music captures this sense of empowerment with the song "It Isn't Nice," connoting the necessity for old women to shed the socialized "being nice" behavior that so many women emulate.¹¹

Too often old women are puzzled by the bombardment of negative images so prevalent in American culture. According to Sharon McQuaide, "Women doing well are

aware of a troubling discrepancy between the positive way they see themselves and social devaluation they perceive, and they feel challenged to live lives that contradict the 'over the hill' stereotype. Their sense of 'personhood' is stronger than ever, yet society and the media are fading them into an invisibility that does not sit well with the baby boomer generation. They are aware of a dissonance between the increased freedom and power they feel and the negative cultural stereotypes and media portrayals."¹²

Kudos to The Old Woman's Project and to Jennifer Abod for so effectively and affectionately chronicling the work of these pioneering women. Abod's film not only debunks the stereotypes that are so deleterious to older women but also offers encouragement to young women who can look forward to a stage in life that affords new opportunities and possibilities, a time of increased agency and renewed activism.



Myrna Hant is a CSW Research Scholar. Much of her work has focused on the stereotypes of mature women in the media, their contributions to ageism, and the few counterhegemonic portrayals of this media archetype.

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LINKS

Old Women's Project, www.oldwomensproject.org
Jennifer Abod, www.jenniferabod.com

NOTES

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