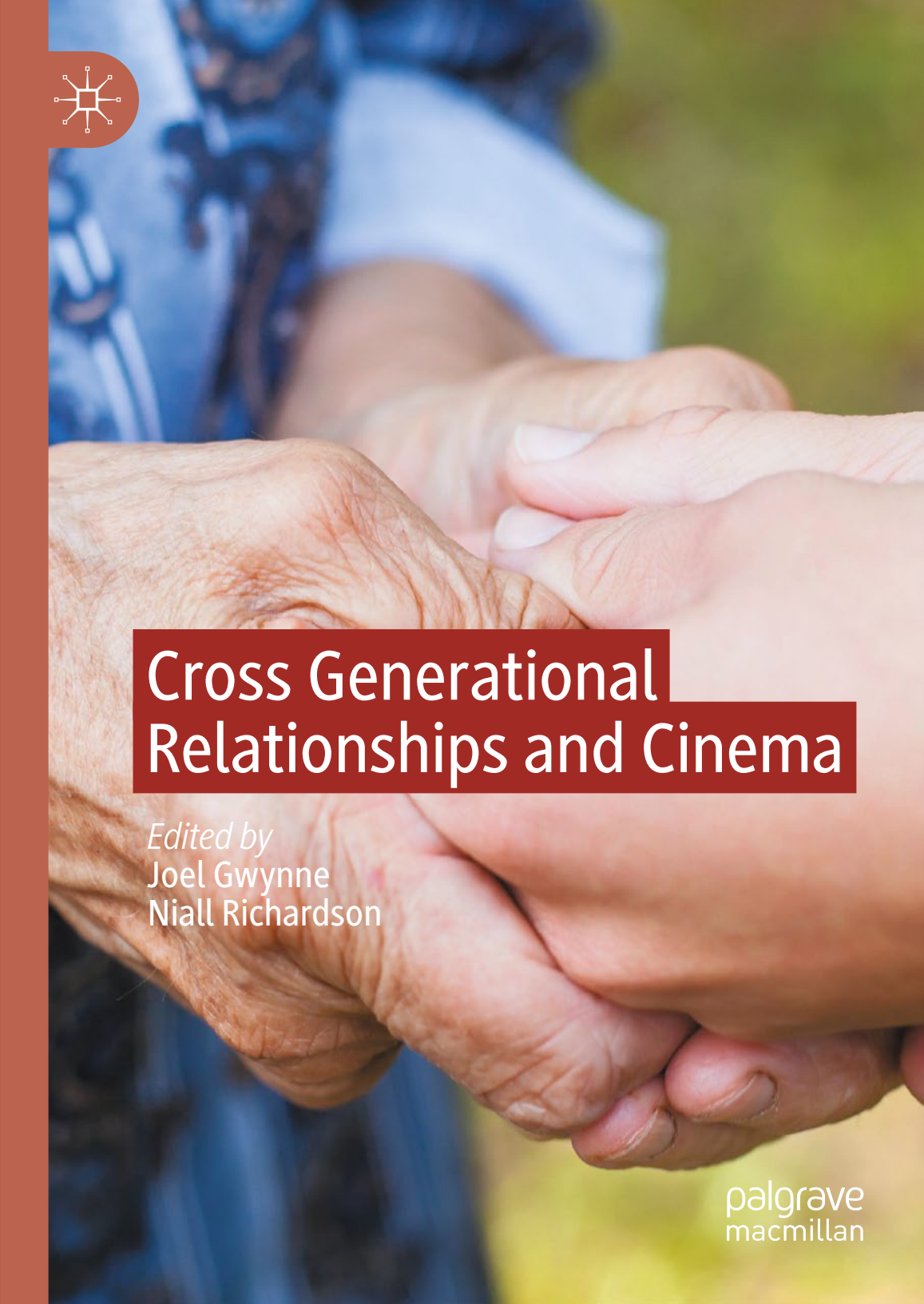

Cross Generational Relationships and Cinema

Edited by
Joel Gwynne
Niall Richardson

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Chapter 5 'Ageing Predators and Asexual Old Queens: Challenging Stereotypes of Cross Generational Gay Relationships in *Beginners and Gerontophilia*' develops arguments first addressed in Niall Richardson's *Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema* (London: I B Tauris, 2018).

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Niall Richardson lectures in film at the University of Sussex where he convenes MA Gender and Media. He is the author of the monographs *The Queer Cinema of Derek Jarman: Critical and Cultural Readings* (2009), *Transgressive Bodies: Representations in Film and Popular Culture* (2010) and *Ageing Femininity on Screen: The Older Woman in Contemporary Cinema* (2018).

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Introduction

Joel Gwynne and Niall Richardson

Across both historical and contemporary popular cultures, the depiction of much older men having romantic and sexual relationships with women who are significantly younger remains hegemonic and normalized. As Linda Alcoff has written, "cross-generational relations between old men and young women are the subject of so many approving cultural representations that they may seem to typify one of the normative scenarios of 'romance'".[1] Similarly, Vicki Bell has asserted that to "desire someone younger than oneself, with less access to power than oneself, is certainly not an abnormal desire. It is the predominant construction of masculine desire in the contemporary form of heterosexuality".[2] This trend perpetuates not only in the European North but also the majority of cultures across the globe. Its prolificacy as a cultural and social trend remains evident in the sheer number of fictional texts which not only feature such relationship configurations but also treat such age disparities as incidental

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and unremarkable even when they may deserve more attention. In Anglophone popular cinema, for example, it has always been accepted that leading men will be paired with *much* younger romantic interests. Fred Astaire was close to 60 when he was paired with a 26-year-old Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face* (1957); Cary Grant was aged 55 when matched with the 26-year-old Grace Kelly in *To Catch a Thief* (1955) while Sean Connery was 52 and seducing the 30-year-old Kim Basinger in *Never Say Never Again* (1983). This trope has continued into contemporary popular cinema with A-List stars usually being paired romantically with considerably younger women. Richard Gere's onscreen love interests tend to be 20–30 years his junior—a pattern which has been maintained from *Pretty Woman* (Gere was 40 while Roberts was 22) through to *Arbitrage* where Gere was 63 and Laetitia Castia 34. Harrison Ford is usually matched with women who are 15–20 years younger than he is and, remarkable as it may seem, the media was more concerned about Anne Heche's sexual identification, when she was cast as Ford's love interest in *Six Days, Seven Nights* (1998), rather than the 20-year age difference.[3] Denzel Washington is 65 (at the time of writing) but his onscreen romantic partners tend to stay 20 years his junior (in *Déjà Vue* Washington was 52 and paired with the 31-year-old Paula Patton) while Johnny Depp is nearly always paired with women under the age of 25.

Beyond the cinema screen, the actual lives of Hollywood icons further exemplify the cross generational trend and reveal significant gender differences in terms of the manner in which such relationships are received by the media and consumed by the public. When the press report on 44-year-old Leonardo DiCaprio's new relationship with yet another much younger lover—currently, at the time of writing this introduction, 21-year-old Camila Morrone—it is difficult to detect either surprise or rebuke. Such patterns of dating are represented as to be expected of Hollywood's most "eligible bachelor", commensurate with the expectation of a lifestyle which accords the wealthy, heterosexual male the means with which to fulfil the wildest dreams of heteronormative hedonism. Indeed, for the heterosexual man, consecutive intergenerational relationships between himself and a younger female firmly align with generational and gendered hierarchies already embedded in society.

However, when the age difference is reversed, and the relationship is between an older woman and younger man, then the media response is much less favourable—if not even condemnatory. A key example is the media coverage of Sam Taylor-Wood and Aaron Johnson's relationship

prior to their marriage. Indeed, the couple have spent much of their relationship defending their 23-year age gap through multiple interviews with magazines (e.g. *Elle* and *Grazia*) and via strategic publicity moves which can be interpreted as reputational management in the face of intense public scrutiny. The examples of DiCaprio compared with Sam Taylor-Wood reveal that not even celebrity status can equalize gender disparities in terms of how culture responds to cross generational relationships.

When popular cinema does represent a romantic relationship between an older woman and a younger man, this has usually been contained within three narrative devices. First, the older woman / younger man relationship can be coded as a caregiving, maternal-style relationship. Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), for example, was only granted script approval if the conclusion coded the relationship between Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson as one in which she cared for him after an accident. (Of course, with characteristic Sirkian irony, the final film image was able to suggest that desire still fuelled the relationship with its representation of the stag at the window.) Other examples have included *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) and *Tim* (1979). More recent variations on this narrative trope—in which female sexual desire is implied but, for various reasons, has been contained—have included the thriller *Cellular* (2004) (the older woman falls in love with the young man via telephone conversations), *Florence Foster Jenkins* (2016) (Florence cannot show physical affection due to her illness) and *The Children Act* (2017).

Alternatively, the relationship of the older woman and younger man is depicted as financially (and often emotionally) exploitative by identifying the young man as a gigolo. These relationships are often coded as humorously or frighteningly grotesque as the younger man manipulates or, at the very least, benefits from the doting affections of a naïve (and sometimes emotionally vulnerable) older woman. This has been a staple Hollywood narrative and examples include *Just a Gigolo* (1931) (although Irene Purcell was only 4 years older than William Haines), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *American Gigolo* (1980) and, most recently, *How to be a Latin Lover* (2017).

More recently, the sexually active older woman is constructed as the comic stereotype of "cougar". Arguably, the first example of a cinematic cougar was Mrs Robinson in *The Graduate* (1967)—a character whose name has almost become synonymous with the concept of the older woman actively seducing a younger man. (Of course, given the gendered ageism of Hollywood, "younger" was more of narrative conceit than

biological reality in *The Graduate* given that Dustin Hoffman was only 6 years younger than Anne Bancroft when the film was produced.) Other cinematic examples include Susan Sarandon's performance as Nora in *White Palace* (1990) and, most recently, the character of Jeanine Stifler (Jeanine Coolidge) (often merely known as Stifler's Mom) in the *American Pie* Series (arguably the film franchise which coined the offensive term MILF).

Given the contemporary media sensibility of postfeminism, the figure of the cougar has attained even greater representation as her sexual activity is invariably linked to her "girling"—namely the processes by which an older woman is represented as continually striving to be a younger version of herself. Postfeminist culture has, after all, reconstructed our entire understanding of the relationship between age and womanhood, as Sarah Projansky contends:

> If the postfeminist woman is always in process, always using the freedom and equality handed to her by feminism in pursuit of having it all (including discovering her sexuality) but never quite managing to reach full adulthood, to fully have it all, one could say that the postfeminist woman is quintessentially adolescent no matter what her age.[4]

Indeed, it is in this context in which the older woman is able to legitimize her sexual activity and cross generational relationships; both are rendered culturally acceptable since her literal age belies both her physical appearance and her embracement of the hedonistic pleasures of youth. It is in this way that the figure of cross generational relationships between older men and younger women rose to discursive prominence in 1998 with the appearance of Kim Cattrall's hypersexual Samantha Jones in *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), a representation elevated within popular television from a mere supporting character to an actual protagonist in the form of Courtney Cox's performance as Jules Cobb in *Cougar Town* (2009–2015).

These cougar identified representations of the older woman who engages in relationships with younger men are, of course, problematic in many ways. The representation of such desires in popular culture is often salacious and sensationalist, implying that the older woman who desires younger men is a dysfunctional nymphomaniac, while other representations may imply a consumerist desire for elevated social status through the ownership of a "toy boy" who serves a purely sexual function for the affluent wife (and nowhere is this more apparent than in the long-running

television series *Desperate Housewives* [2004–2012]). It is notable that the "cougar" figure is, then, symptomatic of trends in postfeminist media culture which equate sexual agency with empowerment and consumerism. None of the female characters in *Desperate Housewives*, for example, situate their relationships with younger men in feminist terms as a subversion of the typical gendered order of cross generational relationships (namely the heteronormative and patriarchal configuration of older man/younger woman). The characters invariably invoke older women's sexuality as predatory, and perhaps even more problematically, the expression of the older woman's sexuality appears contingent on her youthful *appearance* regardless of her actual age. While it could be argued that the reason this cultural representation has gained traction and popular appeal is because it is almost a direct inversion of the sexological and social discourses surrounding the figure of the spinster as sexually repressed, one has to question whether the best way to challenge a stereotype is by simply inverting it? Is a hypersexual older woman necessarily a positive challenge to the depiction of the older women as sexually repressed?

It is important to stress that a simple inversion of the patriarchal pattern of older man with younger woman may be equally problematic. Simply put, if an older male dating a younger female can be understood as an abuse of patriarchal and structural power, does this mean that an older woman dating a younger man cannot be rebuked too on moral or ideological grounds? Or, in the case of same-sex relationships, if an older male is sexually involved with a younger male, does this relationship somehow escape censure since the younger participant is not a young female and, therefore, arguably not as structurally disadvantaged? If an older female is sexually involved with a younger female, does this relationship also escape censure since the older woman is not accorded with the authority of patriarchal privilege? What about non-romantic relationships? How are power dynamics structured and negotiated between older and younger people whose bonds are not sexual? These are just some of the questions addressed in *Cross Generational Relationships in Cinema*.

This book contributes to the recent body of gerontology research within film/media studies. Much of the current scholarship on visual culture has focused on four key debates. First, there have been analyses of *how* ageism is gendered within both popular media texts and entertainment industries themselves. Male actors (both on the screen and within their working lives) encounter considerably less ageism than women and, as identified already, a male Hollywood star can anticipate a much longer

career as a leading man than his female counterpart.[5] Second, critics have focused on how the figure of the ageing woman has been represented on the screen, debating how the coding of older female characters as grotesque "hags", dottie dears or bedridden, dying grandmotherly types are mobilized within popular narratives.[6] Third, there has been research which has considered contemporary representations which have been identified as more "age affirmative", attempting to challenge many of the earlier stereotypes, and negotiate paradigms of "successful ageing" on the screen. Are these recent films really challenging previous gerontophobic stereotypes or are they merely reinforcing sexist ideologies in that female ageing is only "acceptable" if idealized hetero-feminine iconography is maintained?.[7] Finally, there has been some recent scholarship which has considered the problems faced by ageing masculinity (particularly within the genre of action cinema) and how ageing intersects with gay, lesbian and trans identifications.[8]

However, the gerontological research in media studies identified above has focused on the representation of the older *person*. If there is a consideration of how an older character interacts it is only within the framework of genre or narrative analysis. There has yet to be a sustained study which addresses how the dynamics of cross generational relationships are represented and negotiated in contemporary cinema and whether these texts are managing to revise or challenge earlier narratives and stereotypes.

This book begins by broaching the topic of cross generational relationships through three chapters which explore the strong sexual desire of older women who are romantically involved with younger men. Joel Gwynne's chapter focuses on Roger Michell's *The Mother* (2003) and Anne Fontaine's *Adore* (2013), two films which share commonalities in their stark and honest presentation of the sexual subjectivities of older women in relationships with younger men. Both films also interrogate not only the anxieties which pervade advancing age, but also the lived experience of invisibility and diminishing desirability. In his exploration of these chapters, Gwynne poses the question: To what extent does the "coming out" of the desirous and desirable older woman signal a victory for feminism by rendering visible ageing female desire, and by destigmatizing cross generational relationships?

Surveying similar territory, Fiona Handyside's chapter turns our attention to French cinema through three films: Mia Hansen-Løve's *L'Avenir/ Things to Come* (2016), Valeria Bruni-Tedeschi's *Un Chateau en Italie/A Castle in Italy* and Brigitte Roüan's *Post-coïtum animal triste/ After Sex*

(1997). As in Gwynne's chapter, these films all engage with the invisibility of women beyond midlife, and even though they explore the possibility of sexual attraction between a younger man and an older woman, they bring to the fore a sense of loss, grief, and fear, rather than any kind of celebratory or emancipatory rhetoric. Handyside poses the following questions: Do the women in these films need long-term connections to men, or is an investment in futurity one that seeks fulfilment in the birth of a child? Is this truly the connection with the next generation these women seek, and does this offer us a progressive or a reactionary view of sexual politics?

The chapters by Gwynne and Handyside both focus on films which can be largely categorized as independent films which were not box office successes. While it is purely speculative and reductionist to state that the lack of commercial success of these films can be attributed to their stark exploration of the sexual subjectivities of older women, what remains clear is that films which feature cross generational heterosexual relationships but do *not* deeply examine sexuality are often more successful. The next section of this book, then, focuses on films in this vein, namely mainstream Hollywood cinema and its treatment of heterosexual relations between older women and younger men. Opening this section, Diane Negra tackles Anne Fletcher's *The Proposal* (2009), which she argues is part of a cluster of recessionary romances that appeared after the global financial crash in which certitudes about gender and class are subject to revision, situating the film in relation to its "chick flick" predecessors, contemporaries and successors. Negra asserts that *The Proposal*'s age-disproportionate romance is deceptive, an effort to particularize a star-driven romance narrative at a time when "chick flicks" had fallen into commercial disrepute.

As such, Negra's chapter compliments Deborah Jermyn's analysis of the romantic comedy *Home Again* (2017), the directorial debut of Hallie Meyers-Shyer, herself the daughter of rom-com queen Nancy Meyers. This chapter examines how *Home Again* self-consciously alludes to this distinctive filmic pedigree of a mother-daughter cross generational relationship and how the mother-daughter, creative, cross generational relationship informed the marketing, reception and, indeed, narrative substance of the film. Jermyn's chapter asks the following questions: How does *Home Again* seem to reflect an awareness of Meyers-Shyer's place as "her mother's daughter"? And most importantly, in its analysis of the film's relationship between Alice (Reese Witherspoon) and Harry (Pico Alexander), how does it demonstrate, as Meyers first did in 2003 with *Something's Gotta Give*, that the romantic comedy provides a thoughtful,

rich and unusually accommodating home to the figure of the older woman desired by a younger man?

Moving away from heterosexual relationships, it is crucial to consider how queer cinema has explored the relationship between cross generational relationships and heteronormative imperatives. Indeed, if, for many feminists, the normalization of sexual relationships between men and younger women/girls needs to be questioned as deeply suspect, then for queer theorists, the specific forms of condemnation directed towards consensual same-sex intergenerational sexuality is also demanding of interrogation. Opening this section of the book, Niall Richardson interrogates two films—Mike Mills' *Beginners* (2010) and Bruce LaBruce's *Gerontophilia* (2013)—which challenge dominant media stereotypes of ageing gay men. In the former, Mills tackles the stereotype of the older, predatory gay who seeks to "corrupt" innocent, younger men, while LaBruce confronts the stereotype of the desexualised figure of the "old queen"—a body whose ageing and effeminacy dislocates him from hegemonic conceptions of desirability. The chapter argues that both of these stereotypes can be seen to hold similarities with the prejudices surrounding ageing femininity and serve to revise the accepted narrative of the older gay man who is desperately lonely and incapable of maintaining a relationship. In doing so, Richardson argues, *Beginners* challenges the spectator's expectations by reworking narratives of gay male ageing, romantic relationships and how these stories are interpreted, while *Gerontophilia* makes the spectator question their own erotic response to the "abject" "old queen".

Similar to Richardson's chapter, Nick Rees-Roberts also explores the nexus between gerontophilia, queer relationality, sexuality and ageing in Alain Guiraudie's *Staying Vertical* (2016). Asserting that *Staying Vertical* is Guiraudie's "queerest" work to date, the chapter argues that while the film is ostensibly concerned with a creatively blocked filmmaker who lusts after boys while fathering a child with a woman whom he randomly meets, the real subject of interrogation within the film is the social conventions of "age-appropriate" physicality and sexual desirability. The film rejects more mainstream LGBT identity politics of sameness via Guiraudie's utopian vision of unfettered eroticism for men of all ages, this suggesting that smashing taboos of age and ageing and norms of physical attractiveness and desirability provide the key to unlocking the more experimental forms of queer relationality.

The final chapter in this section moves away from more explicit depictions of sexuality, and instead focuses on the more esoteric territory of queer nostalgia. Analyzing Bill Condon's *Gods and Monsters* (1998), Michael Williams makes a compelling analysis of the ways in which the cross generational relationship between James Whale (Ian McKellen) and Clayton Boone (Brendan Fraser) is juxtaposed with nostalgic desire to reclaim and revisit the past. Williams argues that the film is underscored by nostalgia for cinema's own past and, from its 1950s setting, for a perceived utopian age in the gay imaginary, while acknowledging how patriarchal power can exploit the young, whether in wars, ancient or modern, or beside an idyllic Californian pool.

Up until this point in the book, the chapters have all explored romantic and sexual relationships which, while unconventional, all involve consent and reciprocity (although this varies across a spectrum within all of the films discussed). The next section of the book, then, focuses on cross generational relationships where love remains unrequited or rejected and often borders on dysfunctional and toxic. Claire Mortimer opens this section with an analysis Beryl Reid's roles in *The Killing of Sister George* (Aldrich 1968) and *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (Hickox 1970), specifically the manner in which Reid, as she entered middle-age, cultivated the persona of the *grande dame guignol* within the context of relationships with younger partners. By highlighting how these roles departed from the dominant representations of ageing femininity in film comedy which elided any suggestion of sexuality, and through drawing on Mary Russo's work on the 'female grotesque', Mortimer demonstrates how Reid's performance as the older woman in dysfunctional relationships articulated a profound cultural distaste for ageing sexuality.

Moving to more recent cinema, Kwasu D. Tembo locates two films, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) and Giuseppe Tornatore's *Malèna* (2000), within the context of dysfunctional, cross generational desire in the absence of what would normally be regarded as a reciprocal relationship. While both films operate within distinctly separate cultural and cinematic traditions, with Lynch's film framed within the experimental aesthetics and narratology of a psychological thriller set in 1960s–1970s suburbia and Tornatore's against the backdrop of sociopolitical and cultural upheaval during World War II, both films present starkly dark and unconventional coming-of-age narratives. By centering the perspective from the male figures in both films, Tembo asserts that the experiences of Malèna (in *Malèna*) and Dorothy (in *Blue Velvet*) are circumscribed by a

naive gaze, and as such the complexity of their experiences and subjectivity remain unexplored and remote while they exist as objectified figures of intrigue, pleasure, sadness, anger, and desire.

The final section of the book serves to recognize that not all cross generational relationships are romantic or sexual. Sue Thornham's analysis of Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui's *A Simple Life* (2011) considers the intersections of time and space, narrative and image, history and memory. The film tells the story of the developing relationship between middle-aged and unmarried Hong Kong film producer Roger Leung (Andy Lau) and Ah Tao (Deanie Ip), the maid who has served his family for sixty years but who, following a stroke, insists on retiring to a care home. Through this cross generational relationship, Thornham argues, Hui draws out not only a history of love and mutual dependence which Roger has repressed but also the spaces, lives and relationships that Hong Kong's relentless push to modernity renders invisible.

In the final chapter of the book, Alicia Izharuddin juxtaposes two films about transgender motherhood: Upi Avianto's popular 2006 film *Realita, Cinta, dan Rock n Roll* (Reality, Love, and Rock n Roll) and Teddy Soeriaatmadj's 2011 film *Lovely Man*. While both films demonstrate the stereotypical conventions of transgender identities onscreen—the "reveal", hyperfeminine drag and the embodiment of transfemininity by muscular leading men—Izharuddin argues that the films remain subversive through a depiction of trans-motherhood which reconfigures the Indonesian nuclear family into a more unsettling/unsettled unit that resists fixity of boundaries. The chapter argues that "archipelagic intergenerational relations" bring into focus the ways in which the Indonesian family is "transed" when the cross generational unit of transgender mother and biological child reunite after estrangement.

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Female Desire in Cross Generational Relationships

Mother and Lover: Dissident Desire and the Older Woman in *The Mother* and *Adore*

Joel Gwynne

Released in 2003, Roger Michell's *The Mother* is a sombre portrayal of May's (Ann Reid) struggle with loneliness in the aftermath of the death of Toots (Peter Vaughan), her husband of more than thirty years. Unable to receive comfort and meaningful connection from both of her estranged, grown-up children—with whom she maintains a difficult relationship marked by unresolved tension—May commences an affair with her daughter's lover, Darren (Daniel Craig), who is more than twenty years younger and married with children of his own. Released in 2013, Anne Fontaine's *Adore* adapts Doris Lessing's novella "The Grandmothers" (2003) and narrates the turbulent romantic lives of lifelong friends Lil (Naomi Watts) and Roz (Robin Wright) who, as they pass into middle-age, begin romantic and sexual relationships with each other's sons. Both films share a number of commonalities and function as useful points of contrast and

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