


CAMBIANDO LOS RELATOS DEL ENVEJECIMIENTO: LAS REPRESENTACIONES DE LA VEJEZ FEMENINA DE EMMA THOMPSON EN *LATE NIGHT* Y *BUENA SURTE, LEO GRANDE*

Changing Narratives of Ageing: Emma Thompson's Performances of Female Old Age in Late Night and Good Luck to You, Leo Grande

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RESUMEN

Al inicio de su sexta década de vida, Emma Thompson sigue siendo una actriz prolífica, cuyos trabajos cinematográficos más recientes presentan la edad como un aspecto destacado. Mientras que en la película *Late Night* (2019) recrea la crisis de una presentadora famosa de programas de noche, cuya carrera parece acabarse cuando cumple sesenta años, en *Buena suerte, Leo Grande*, presenta la cruzada personal de una mujer que ha enviudado recientemente y que quiere sentir placer sexual por primera vez en su vida. En este artículo, ofrecemos el análisis textual de los contra-relatos del envejecimiento femenino que se desarrollan a través de dos de las interpretaciones más recientes de Emma Thompson en papeles protagonistas. A través del género de la comedia dramática, estos relatos cinematográficos de la vejez femenina tratan y a la vez subvierten temas que todavía se consideran tabú desde puntos de vista edadistas o sexistas, o ambos, y que están estrechamente relacionados con la sexualidad (femenina), la creatividad y la imagen corporal en la madurez.

Palabras clave: envejecimiento; género; sexo; sexualidad; estudios de cine; estrellato; Emma Thompson.

ABSTRACT

At the onset of her sixtieth decade, Emma Thompson remains a prolific actress, whilst 'age' has become a more salient trait in her cinematic roles. While in the film *Late Night*

(2019) she depicts a critical moment in the life of a successful late-night talk-show host whose career seems to reach a dead end when she turns sixty, in *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* (2022) she presents the personal quest of a recently widowed woman to feel sexual pleasure for the first time in her life. In this article, we offer a textual analysis of the counter-narratives of female aging developed through Emma Thompson's performances in two of her most recent leading roles. Within the genre of dramatic comedy, these cinematic narratives of female old age address and subvert topics that are still considered taboo from either ageist or sexist perspectives, or both, and which are closely related to (female) sexuality, creativity and body image in later life.

Keywords: ageing; gender; sex; sexuality; film studies; stardom; Emma Thompson.

1. Introduction

The silvering of Hollywood (or of mainstream cinema) may be considered one of the key topics in ageing studies nowadays. Whereas scholars such as Timothy Shary and Nancy McVittie (2016) or Josephine Dolan (2017) point out that «the industry promotes an often preferred vision of life and, in the process, reveals an idealized vision of what elder movie character might encounter» (Dolan, 2017, p. 3), the work by Sally Chivers (2011), Pamela Gravagne (2013) and Elizabeth Markson (2003), among other film scholars, proves that the narrative of decline is still endemic to filmic representations of ageing. At the same time, these scholars acknowledge the powerful influence of films and media in building alternative conceptions attached to ageing and old age, and argue that presenting older characters «as people whose identity is in constant process of formation rather than as individuals who are caught in the final stages of a unidirectional, abstract, and predictable journey of life» (Gravagne, 2013, p. 9) may contribute to questioning stereotypical images of ageing. This is particularly significant in representations of female old age, which, until quite recently, have been reduced to «culturally irrelevant» stereotypical roles (Gravagne, 2013, p. 66), and have often been encapsulated by motherly or grandmotherly figures (Markson, 2003, p. 83), or other marginal characterizations that depict older women «as outsiders, unacceptable or wrong, fragile, dependent, or as the carers of other old people» (Byrski, 2014, p. 17-18). In this respect, the increasingly varied and more complex representation of female ageing in film and media is paramount to undermine the construction of female old age as a problem (Casado-Gual and Oró-Piqueras, 2017; Oró-Piqueras and Casado-Gual, 2017). As Liz Byrski argues, the way we «see ourselves represented in the culture, influences the ways women can imagine, observe and experience their own ageing» (2014, p. 17). Likewise, the popular impact of women celebrities who, in the prevalently ageist and sexist film industry, continue to have active careers past their sixties, plays a fundamental role in the generation of a new narrative of female old age. According to Barbara Marshall and Momin Rahman, celebrities are central to constructing this new vision of ageing, especially in the way they «mediate the contradictions in cultural discourses and identities of ageing» (2015, p. 589).

Emma Thompson, one of Britain's (and Hollywood's) most respected actresses is, at the onset of her sixtieth decade, one of the silvering celebrities to have lately brought the reductive (mis)representation of female ageing into the spotlight. Through

the promotion of her latest film, *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, at this year's Berli-nale, Thompson drew considerable media attention by vindicating the older woman's body. Her public statements were closely connected to her character's story in the film, that is, that of Nancy Stokes, a recently widowed older woman who decides to hire the services of a young sex worker to feel pleasure for the first time. Thompson's previous film in a leading role, *Late Night* (2019), also presented a complex portrayal of female old age through the character of Katherine Newbury, a famous talk-show host whose career seems to reach a dead end when she turns sixty, and who confronts her network's decision to replace her in the programme. The film's script, which explicitly foregrounds age as an asset for the protagonist, was written by actress (and film co-star) Mindy Kaling thinking of Emma Thompson for the lead role. As Thompson declared in the media, it took her by surprise as one of the best scripts she had been offered in years.

Building on previous work done in the field of ageing and film studies, as well as in the broader framework of cultural gerontology, this article is grounded on the assumption that the combination of Emma Thompson's star persona with the creation of complex female characterizations of age is bound to contribute to extending the spectrum of ageing femininity within both cultural and social spheres. Based on this hypothesis and drawing from Niall Richardson's work on strategies of «age affirmation» in contemporary cinema (2019), this article offers a textual analysis of *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, with the objective of demonstrating to what extent they contribute to revising ageist cinematic discourse, particularly directed to women. In the sections that follow and that comprise the analysis, we first explore how female old age is initially constructed in the two films through the narrative of decline, which impregnates the characters' presentations and dramatic conflict; then, we consider the «age affirmation» strategies used in each of them to transform the initially reductive narrative of female old age into a narrative of growth; and, finally, we take into account the meanings derived from the intersection between Emma Thompson's star persona and her two latest (and highly contrasted) roles, with which a more nuanced portrayal of ageing femininity is attained.

2. Initial characterizations: Departing from the Narrative of Decline

Thompson's characters and performances in *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* are practically diametrically opposed. However, they have an important element in common: the sense of disempowerment that the two figures are made to feel in their respective contexts, mainly due to their age, but also in close connection with their gender. In both cases, the experience of female ageing either demonizes them (*Late Night*) or renders them inferior (*Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*) in the predominantly youth-oriented and male-dominated contexts in which they are portrayed. As Gravagne states in her well-known study on representations of ageing in contemporary American cinema, «the filmic treatment of older women often encodes a problematic relation to speech as integral to a woman's gender and age, awakening unbidden in the listener stereotypical notions of the older woman as not worth listening to, as culturally irrelevant – dead or alive» (66). Indeed, the protagonists of both films are depicted as mature women whose voice is minimized or simply unheard

in the worlds they inhabit. However, their double marginalization is not apparent at the beginning of neither of the films; rather, it is a reality they must either discover or come to terms with.

On the one hand, Katherine Newbury, the protagonist of *Late Night*, is initially presented as a character whose prestige and success are recognized and celebrated within the entertainment industry. The first sequence of the film shows her receiving a new award, which underlines her popularity as a British stand-up comedian who has been successful in the American TV for decades: her joke in her acceptance speech, «is there no one funny left in the country?», efficiently synthesizes both her uniqueness as a foreign celebrity, and the unusual endurance of her career within a medium that constantly demands novelty. However, the sequences that follow her acceptance of the award quickly undermine her initially successful portrayal, as they soon reveal Katherine's loneliness and her own disengagement with current trends in entertainment. This is clearly reflected when Katherine is shown celebrating her success at a pub on her own while watching a young stand-up comedian deliver an eschatological monologue with an overtly dismissive look. Successive sequences also mirror her distanced, even abusive relationship with her team of writers, whom she hardly knows personally, literally refers to by numbers, and regards as totally responsible for her show's decreasing popularity. Once the new president of the network announces the channel's decision to replace Katherine with a much younger host in the following season (and proposes the young comedian Katherine had dismissed as her substitute), the protagonist is treated as a decadent celebrity who has lost touch with the world, and whose interviews and monologues for the show are not fashionable (and therefore, not profitable) anymore. The presentation of the dramatic conflict and, especially, Katherine's initial attempts to remain in her show by exploiting and even verbally abusing her team of writers and assistants, easily evoke the age-related predicament and even grotesque characterizations of other older figures which, either in literature, (Brennan 2005, pp. 46-75) theatre, (Mangan, 2013, pp. 80-91) film (Chivers, 2011, pp. 38-57) or other media (Oró-Piqueras and Wohlmann, 2016, pp.71-90) have reinforced the association between ageing and decline in popular culture by resisting change and failing to maintain their position of power.

On the other hand, the protagonist of *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, is directly presented as a marginal character, very much in the line of the stereotypical mould reserved for older women that Chivers, Gravagne and other film scholars have observed in many cinematic narratives. As opposed to Katherine Newbury's glamorous style as a TV star, Nancy Stokes' traditional looks, with her grey, short hair, and her conventional clothes, signify her age and discreet personality, as well as her social background as a retired high-school teacher who has dedicated her life to her job and her family. Nancy's apparently modest appearance (and the sociocultural connotations it generates) soon contrast with the character's main objective (namely, to have an orgasm or, at least, to feel sexual pleasure for the first time in her life) and, even more, with the means she employs to achieve it. To this end, Nancy has several dates with a male sex worker who is at least half her age, and with whom she shares not only sex, but also deep conversations about life, in the hotel room where they meet. Nancy's private quest, as well as the means she chooses to pursue her objective, could first suggest an empowered characterization (or, considering the

controversies attached to sex work, at least they render Nancy an agent in her later years with respect to her sexuality. Nonetheless, her lack of confidence in her own body, mostly generated by her limited sexual experience, and reflected in her restless attitude and prudish gestures, is heavily contrasted with the relaxed and confident demeanour of the young sex worker. Through Nancy's initial portrayal as a desiring older woman who is self-sabotaged by her own self-image, female old age is ambivalently presented as both a source of potential change and, at the same time, as an impossible object of desire, preventing the same change that is wished for from happening.

Despite their different dramatic conflicts, the dilemmas of the two characters are similarly sustained by the cultural weight of gender in its intersection with age. While Katherine's predicament as a brilliant older woman who feels her professional life is not over yet reflects the effect of social age in youth-centred public domains (Gullette 2004), Nancy's struggle to accept her own body image as beautiful and pleasant to both others and herself can be explained through her subjective or personal age (Woodward, 1991, p.149), which is, at the same time, deeply affected by internalized self-ageism. As Gullette states from her experience as a long-term age studies scholar, «the narrative of decline involved unconscious habits of thought and affected every subidentity, ways of seeing bodies and of holding one's own» (2004, p. 28). In Katherine's case, her subidentity as an (extremely irascible) boss is aligned with masculine notions of power. In conflict with the overtly feminist outlook of the network's president, Katherine's alleged misogyny is part of her bad reputation among her co-workers. Even though she tries to amend her bias against her own gender by hiring Molly, a (young) female co-writer, she is often dreaded as a witch-like figure by the rest of (male) characters, and hence accrues the legacy of sexism and ageism in her area of influence, both as victim and oppressor. The intersection of age and gender in *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, in contrast, is entirely manifested in Nancy's private life and within a context of intimacy. Yet, it is also firmly rooted in an ageist and sexist cultural system. In this case, Nancy is incapable of regarding herself as a (satisfied) sexual being, not so much due to her own views as a former teacher of Religion, which she will be able to transcend at the end of the film, but mainly because the entire culture in which her character is inscribed has failed to present older women's bodies in a natural, let alone pleasant, manner. As gender and ageing critics have demonstrated, whereas naked midlife bodies are not shown in television, the expression of sexual desire from the part of women characters oscillates between the accepted sexy midlife woman and a repulsion toward the female ageing body (Hinchliff, 2014, p. 67). According to Woodward, the «visual obsession of western culture with youth and with the appearance of the body» has contributed to making the older female body «invisible and hypervisible» at the same time: invisible, because it is rarely shown; and hypervisible, because when it appears, it is attached to the narrative of decline (1999, p. xvi). At both a literal and symbolic level, Nancy must come to terms with the culturally constructed inappropriateness of her own naked older body, both invisible and hypervisible to herself, which has disengaged her from her own femininity throughout her life, and very especially at the onset of her old age. This disengagement is symbolically represented in the film by the fact that Nancy claims to have never had an orgasm before; and its long-term effects are emphasized by the start of her quest for one after her retirement.

3. Changing the Narrative: Strategies of Age Affirmation in the Two Films

The narrative of decline, in its intersection with the effects of sexism, clearly underlies the initial characterization of Thompson's protagonists in the two films, as well as their main dilemmas. However, the narrative soon changes in both cases through various «age affirmation» strategies, as defined by Richardson (2019), with which the films gradually lean towards a more constructive story of (female) ageing. In other words, through these devices, the films' initially conflictive portrayals of female ageing end up leading to two stories of growth and (female) self-validation in later life.

In the two cases, the protagonists' socially imposed and self-internalized declinist views start to reverse once they realize that they have been victims of generalised ageist attitudes that they had assimilated. Significantly enough, it is the characters' younger partner in each film that elicits this realization through a highly positive portrayal of intergenerational relations – which, in the two narratives, benefits the older character. In *Late Night*, it is Molly that introduces a menopause joke in one of Katherine's stand-up speeches, one that feels so sincere that Katherine herself decides not to use at the very last minute. Despite Katherine's initial doubts, Molly will gradually help her boss see that what makes her different and necessary in the show is precisely her uniqueness as an older woman in male-dominated, youth-oriented entertainment TV, offering genuine opinions on public life from her own stance. Similarly, Leo is paramount for Nancy's reconceptualization of age as a natural part of sex and viceversa, and essential to help Nancy re-consider her own body as both source and object of desire. In the first encounter between Nancy and Leo, Nancy expresses her insecurities about hiring a younger sexual worker and whether he will find her attractive, to which Leo answers: "I like your mouth; I like the line of your neck down to here. This, so elegant".

The intergenerational relationships that lie at the centre of the films can certainly be considered an age affirmation strategy that the two cinematic narratives have in common. Yet, each film codes other age affirmation strategies differently and, in this way, they emphasize different facets of female ageing manifested through the characters' professional (Katherine) or private (Nancy) domains. In *Late Night*, Katherine's age-based empowerment is mostly conveyed both verbally, through the change in her discourse, and performatively, through the exaggerated version of herself that she personifies in the new sketches of her show –where, in a self-parodic mode, she satirizes her own privileged position as an ageing, White, upper-class celebrity, and in this way subverts Molly's provocative observation that she is «a little too white and a little too old» for current TV. By comically behaving as an empowered older woman who tries to help passers-by in all kinds of ways, she draws the viewers' attention to both racial and social-class inequalities, while at the same time subverting social scripts related to cultural constructions of age and gender.

Even with more intensity, her age-affirmative re-orientation is reflected in the monologues she delivers in the last part of the film, once she has become aware of the actual interest that her (usually politically incorrect) perspectives on various issues generate in her team and her audience. In all her performances, she verbally foregrounds age as an important identity marker through which she validates her own views, also as a woman. In fact, having overcome her fears to use menopause in a punch line, she reconciles with her own femininity and questions her former

conservative values. It could be said that having been encouraged (by Molly) to prove her value as an ageing female comedian, Katherine's own conceptions of ageing and femininity also change, and she feels liberated and empowered enough to disclose the sexism and ageism dominating her industry and society in general. This is clearly reflected in one of her funniest speeches:

You know what, I've got it, I can play Sean Penn's grandmother in a movie in which he marries Emma Stone. His childhood sweetheart. It's so unfair. Tom Cruise is the same age as me. We're the same age. He gets to fight the mummy. I am the mummy. No, no, I'm too old to play the mummy. They get Anne Hathaway to play de mummy and they'll put lots of mummy make up on her. I'll probably have to have a facelift and do voicework. I'm gonna must have Botox just to play the voice of a tree in a Pixar movie.

Ironically, by performing her age through her monologues and comic acts, Katherine can find a more authentic version of herself, one that not only values her social and cultural position as an older woman, but also accepts her need of others (especially of her husband and her team of writers). Due to her recently awakened anti-ageist perspective, Katherine ends up embracing professional camaraderie, female solidarity, and intergenerational interdependence.

In *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, age affirmation is mainly signified visually, through a subtle but straightforward presentation of Nancy's semi-naked body in most of the film's sequences, the majority of which have the hotel room where Nancy and Leo meet as the main setting. Nancy's initial insecurity, clearly performed in the presentation of the character as she awaits her partner in the hotel room on their first date, is replaced by her growing confidence in the embodiment of her sexuality and her femininity in the dates that follow. As Nancy's sexual adventure with Leo advances, Nancy is increasingly shown as attractive, wearing sexier clothes, and as emanating knowledge and self-reassurance, until in the final sequences she can show her nudity as naturally as her partner and, more importantly, she can look at it and embrace it as part of her identity with both acceptance and interest. In the film, this is represented by a final close-up scene in which Nancy goes from stroking her belly, indicating her awareness of her age, to gently stroking her pubis as a symbol of her reconciliation with her sexuality. As she scrutinizes her naked body in front of the mirror, her smile shows that she has come to terms (and happily so) with whom she is now.

The centrality of the mirror in this scene (even more symbolic as the last one of the film) re-constructs culturally-ingrained images of old age. On the one hand, it indirectly creates a contrast with the way popular culture has typically presented the ageing woman as fearing her own old age and as even becoming a witch-like character through it (the famous scene in the fairy tale *Snow White*, in which the magic mirror dethrones the older stepmother from being the most beautiful woman in the realm, is an emblematic example). On the other hand, it suggests a new dimension of the 'mirror stage of old age' developed by Woodward (1991); one in which Nancy trespasses the social and cultural boundaries refracted by the image of her own older body to confront what Williams et al., drawing on Woodward, have termed "the unwatchability" of sexuality in later life (2007, p. 2). In this sense, Nancy's contemplating her ageing body in front of the mirror may be read as a unique moment of cinema in which the character firstly acknowledges (and, more importantly, accepts) the changes of old age in her body that, from a social, external perspective, have

harmfully categorized her ageing femininity as unattractive; but even more importantly, as the instant in which she realizes the potentialities her older body harbours, with which she may re-discover parts of herself which she had barely experienced as a younger woman. As Nancy K. Miller states, «if learning to see oneself —as a woman— aging, can't be separated from how we have learned to see ourselves as women in the first place, part of how to find new ways of perceiving ourselves as aging bodies and faces is to construct a narrative in which these images can be read, otherwise» (1991, p. 12). Indeed, when Nancy embarks on the quest of having an orgasm for the first time, she also acknowledges the fact she had barely experienced with (or even seen) her own body nor enjoyed sex with her husband; by doing so, she is capable of generating a new narrative about who she has been so far (as a wife, mother and teacher who had paid little attention to herself) and about who she is right now, as a recently empowered older woman.

Beyond the nuances that the verbalized, performed, or embodied strategies of age affirmation bring in each of the two films, they can be both interpreted as stories of growth in old age, or as two cinematic *Reifungsromane*, to use Barbara Frey Waxman's term (1990). In both narratives, a pro-active life review enables mistakes of the past to enlighten the characters' present, thereby consolidating the characters' growth. In *Late Night*, this life review is more explicitly delivered and offered as a source of transformation at the end of the film when, in her last monologue, Katherine confronts her past affair with one of her co-writers after this has just been disclosed by the press, putting her job at risk once again. Even though, as Molly warns her, her public lynching has to do with her demonization as an older woman who dared to have a relationship with a younger man, Katherine does not use the instrumentalization of her affair as an excuse to avoid her own responsibility. Rather, through her confessional monologue (which at this point she believes will be the last one in her career), she recognises that having an affair was part of her own egotistical personality, which made her take her ever-caring husband for granted and led her to neglect those who worked with her, and even her audience. Katherine revises her own double standards in these words: «If it were a man doing this, it would be reprehensible, but guess what, it's a woman doing it, and it's still reprehensible. And none of this would even matter if I were not so hard on everyone with such high standards that I defined my career by it.» It is her sincerity and her capacity to learn from her own mistakes that finally earn Katherine the definitive respect of both her audiences and co-workers, as reflected in the standing ovation they give her at the end of her speech. It is also this final review that earn her «the privilege of her (audience's) time», as she herself puts it, in future seasons of the programme, hence solving the film's dramatic conflict: once in her dressing room, Katherine is surprised by the network's president's popping in to say she wants her to continue in the show in the coming seasons. In fact, her honest and rich stance as an older woman is validated when she tells her: «I want to hear your take in the world, everywhere.»

Similarly, Nancy confronts her past in one of the last scenes in *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, which takes place at the café of the hotel where Nancy and Leo have had their previous dates, and where Nancy has asked Leo to meet her for the last time. While she waits for him, she meets Becky, a former student in her Religion class who now works at the hotel as a waitress. Becky reminds Nancy of how hard she used to be with female students she referred to as «sluts» due to their appearance or lifestyle. Having gained a completely new perspective about her body and about the right to

enjoy one's sexuality (to the extent of agreeing with Leo that sex should be «a public service»), Nancy surprises Becky by offering an open apology about her past behaviour, with this recently learnt life lesson: «Pleasure is a wonderful thing; it's something we should all have». Through their similar integration of the characters' mistakes within a process of atonement and its resulting growth, the *Reifungsromane* generated by both films avoid reproducing a simplistic narrative of progress whereby a model of successful ageing (that is, one merely focused on the completion of professional or personal quests) could be suggested. Instead, they generate a nuanced story of personal transformation whereby notions of the self are questioned, and the protagonists' past is finally confronted and integrated to offer new lessons to others, but mostly to themselves.

4. Intersecting Fictions of Female Ageing with Celebrity Culture

To complete the analysis of the age affirmation strategies that contribute to changing the narrative of female ageing in *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, the role that Emma Thompson's star persona plays in both films, especially as an ageing celebrity, needs to be considered. The work of scholars such as Josephine Dolan (2017), Imelda Wehelan and Joel Gwynne (2014), and Barbara L. Marshall and Momin Rahman (2014), among others, has proved that the silvering screen is having an impact on the silvering of celebrity culture, to the point that a few ageing female's stars, such as Helen Mirren and Meryl Streep, remain in the spotlight through stories where they play the lead role. This has a clear effect on the way popular discourses on female ageing are being re-shaped. In fact, Fairclough-Isaacs talks about «a new kind of acceptability» (2014, p. 146) when referring to the cases of Mirren and Streep in their respective embodiment of old age since, according to the author, «they have managed to age in front of the camera and be highly visible in celebrity culture without facing the vitriol and lack of roles that many other actresses are confronted with as they age» (p. 146). This is clearly the case with Emma Thompson who, especially through the two films analysed in this paper, but also through other roles she has had in recent years for both film and TV, remains very much part of the (reduced) group of mature stars who enjoy a continuous cinematic and public presence, and whose careers (including their later work) are characterized by a rich palette of roles, genres and styles of performance. In this respect, the persona of Emma Thompson contributes to enhancing the models of healthy or active ageing which, in many ways, are constructed by Katherine's and Nancy's narrative arcs: first and foremost, as an actress who (like Katherine) has remained loyal to her vocation and active in her profession for decades; and, secondly, as a woman who (like Nancy) is regarded as attractive without succumbing to youth-centred aesthetic imperatives.

It could be argued, though, that Thompson's status as a silvering star favours a more overt association between Katherine's and Nancy's characterizations and a model of ageing aligned with neoliberal standards of constant personal achievement (even in Nancy's more exceptional characterization as a socially invisible older woman). Marshall and Rahman argue that celebrity culture directed to an older audience promotes «a particular lifestyle and aspirational identity for older adults, characterized by the four Fs – fitness, fashion, functionality and flexibility» (2014, p. 578). For her part, Dolan acknowledges the presence of silvering celebrities on the screen where they would

have been invisible just a few years ago and refers to the double standard triggered by «the profit-making capacities of both the film and fashion industries» (2017, p. 82) still working in their representation, arguing that older women are dressed neither «too young or too old» and «older female bodies are visible while also concealing the signs of age written on those bodies» (p. 82), ultimately showing the «promise of a consumer inclusiveness that serves only to shore up the terms of exclusivity» (p. 82).

Whereas part of this is clearly present in Thompson's glamorous, fit-looking, and at the same time age-neutral characterization as Katherine in *Late Night*, which is translated in her fashionable hairstyle and elegant clothes composed of embroidered vests and flashy blazers, *Goodbye to You* takes a step forward towards affirmative ageing in its representation of an ordinary, almost socially invisible older woman whose traditional haircut and dressing style, and her social-class identity as a pensioner move her away from elitist standards of success. Even though Nancy's status as a retired teacher allows her to afford the services of a sex worker, the limitations of her pension are implied every time that Nancy stresses out the fact that they can only meet for a few dates due to her budgetary limits. At the same time, the considerable number of scenes in which she is shown wearing either a vest or a bra, probably showing Nancy's gradual opening to sexual pleasure, contrasts with Hollywood's prudish approach to the ageing (female) body. Even the apparently more successful portrayal of Katherine is conflated with personal details of Emma Thompson's star persona that introduce a sense of fragility in her characterization and, in this way, prevent the character from following Hollywood's highly restrictive mould of silvering femininity. In contrast with the character's professional success, which is signified by the references to and visual presence of many Emmy awards in the film that clearly evoke Thompson's own multiple awards, and also contrasted with her solid national prestige, illustrated by the Dame title that Thompson also ostends, Katherine reveals her lifelong struggle with clinical depression to Molly, a revelation that Thompson also made in a Radio 4 interview in 2010 and that helped give visibility to mental illnesses (Mindfood, 2022). In the film, this aspect of her persona fuses character and actress perfectly when Molly learns about Katherine's mental health issues while watching an old video of her boss performing an act as a very young comedian (which, inevitably, revives Thompson's long trajectory as an actress). As Katherine confesses to her scriptwriter that she was terribly depressed at that time, and that she remains so, Thompson's public declarations of her own mental health issues (especially in early stages of her career) become part of the subtext of the scene. Through this intertextual fusion between character and actor, a more nuanced portrayal of ageing is generated, one in which resilience is given more value than success.

Beyond the contrasts and coincidences lying in the intersection between Thompson's public persona and her two characters, all of which complement the age affirmation strategies of the two films, while at the same time placing them apart from more conventional qualities of the silvering screen, Thompson's artistic skills and her public projection contribute to adding authenticity to her representation of different experiences of female ageing in the two films. As has been demonstrated, in *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, Emma Thompson performs two types of woman with quite opposed personalities and very different backgrounds, who yet equally have to come to terms with the ageist conceptions of ageing femininity that they themselves had embraced until the specific time in which the films take place. As already mentioned in the introduction, Thompson herself has referred to the ageist conceptions

that taint women's ageing processes in the promotion of both films. In an interview published in the *New York Times* after the release of *Late Night*, Thompson declares that «the denial of aging is unhealthy» (Buckley, 2019, p. 1) and adds: «We skipped from being in the kitchen to being in the tank, and there's nothing in between. So, we still have failed to explore and bring to the screen what being a woman is» (2019, p. 4). One of the statements that went viral during her promotion of *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* included her confession that, in the first on-screen nude of her long career, looking at her own naked body in the mirror «without judgement had been the hardest thing [she'd] ever had to do» (Devine, 2022, p.1). Indeed, in *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande*, Thompson explores not only what being an older woman can be like, but also what surviving to the constant exposure of ageist conceptions of female ageing – either at public or personal levels – may actually lead to.

5. Conclusion

The textual analysis of the two films studied in this article has demonstrated how contemporary cinema is turning to new narratives of ageing femininity and, by doing so, it is contributing to re-constructing images of female old age in popular discourse. The analysis has shown that, despite the declinist overtones of their main dramatic conflicts and their diverse narrative strategies and central characterizations, *Late Night* and *Good Bye to You, Leo Grande* equally generate two nuanced *Reifungsromane* or stories of growth in a woman's later life, which at the same time enhance the social and cultural pressure exerted on women into their sixties. The anti-ageist elements of the two cinematic narratives are closely related to the strategies of «age affirmation» they employ (Richardson, 2019), which are mirrored in the way their main characters perform and embody their age with empowerment, in how they integrate their past into the present through the life reviews they engage in, and in their willingness to embrace the future and, with it, new explorations of their own self.

As has been explained, the relationship between Katherine and Nancy and their younger partners plays a crucial role in the two cinematic narratives: even though, at first, the presence of a younger character underlines the powerful effect of the narrative of decline, it soon leads the two mature women to precisely question and, eventually, overcome their own ageist and, even sexist, internalised beliefs. As *Reifungsromane*, it can be noted that, in both cases, it is the older protagonists that are more substantially influenced by their younger friends. Nonetheless, Nancy and Katherine also have a positive impact on the younger counterparts (whereas Molly becomes a reputed script writer in Katherine's programme, Leo becomes more at peace with the troubled relationship he has with his mother). Even more relevant than this, and as a powerful age-affirmation component in its own right, the relationship between the older and younger character in the two films is one based on honesty and mutual respect; in this sense, it is also a clear sign of the anti-ageist power of the two cinematic narratives.

Emma Thompson's status as a long-time acclaimed actress not only has favoured a wider visibility of these two stories of growth but has also enriched their central character creations with meanings assigned to or derived from her own silvering star persona. Through Thompson's highly contrasted and equally powerful performances, Katherine Newbury and Nancy Stokes accrue distinctive facets of the artist. While her glamorous appearances in festivals and TV programmes, and her outspoken activism in

various causes (including feminism and anti-ageism) are closer to Katherine's characterization, her more private declarations evoke the introspective qualities of Nancy's character, as well as the scenes in which Katherine's inner fragility is suggested. In comparison to other recent characterizations in Thompson's late career in film and TV, which range from extreme-right politicians (*Years and Years*) to smothering or liberating mothers living across cultures (*Last Christmas*, *What's Love Got to Do with It?*), up to modern versions of witch-life figures (*Cruella*, *Matilda*), Katherine Newbury and Nany Stokes offer the most nuanced versions of ageing femininity within Thompson's growing spectrum of older women to date. Coherent with the conventions of dramatic comedy at work in the two films, the optimistic endings of *Late Night* and *Good Luck to You, Leo Grande* encourage audiences to imagine hopeful futures for their protagonists, or at least truly alternative images of female old age. However, it is up to the artists and producers in the film industry and, even more, to the audiences themselves, to take the actual change of narrative that Thompson personifies in these films as a serious, even urgent matter.

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