

Book Review

Title: *The Silvering Screen: Old Age and Disability in Cinema*

Author: Sally Chivers

Publisher: Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011

Paper: ISBN: 978-0-8020-1104-7

Cost: \$24.95 from the publisher, 240 pages

Reviewer: Amanda T. McLaughlin

Western society often looks to media for guidance, vulnerable to its overt anti-aging message that personal value is based on youthfulness and to buy products that perpetuate it. Westerners are left with a sense of emptiness and worthlessness at the sight of graying hair and wrinkling skin. Western media displays a grossly skewed, though endlessly enticing idea of beauty. Celebrities are used as a point of reference and comparison, leaving those exposed to their seeming perfection feeling less than adequate.

In *The Silvering Screen*, Sally Chivers tackles this subject, showing Hollywood's unfair representation of older characters, especially women over the age of 60. This book aims to highlight the realities of how the film industry unfairly portrays characters of a certain age, and does so under the lens of a disability focus, asking the difficult question of where the older population belongs in a society. Are they relegated to feeble, helpless, sickly, mentally inferior wretches that must be a burden until they finally die? Chivers' assessment of many films, from the fifties to the present, illustrates how again and again we relegate the post-60 demographic to a less than desirable position in society. Our elderly population, according to films like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), where the heroine would rather shut herself off from the world than face the reality of aging in the film industry, is all but worthless. If we solely turned to film for our sense of direction, for our social and personal cues, we would entirely dismiss people of a certain age, and without guilt.

Chivers eloquently elaborates on the notion that the ideas presented in such films contribute to the mounting fear western society has of aging and the cultural and economic implications of our demographic shift that the aging population is causing. Chivers asks the reader to consider venturing further, to align this attitude towards the aging with that of people with disabilities. She boldly addresses the idea that because certain disabilities can arise as one ages, such as Alzheimer's, as in the film, *Iris* (2001), these films offer an interesting parallel that indicates the truth of how our society views those with disabilities. It has become accepted behavior, according to the films provided, to dismiss the aging, to ignore them because they cannot be as readily and actively participatory. When you apply this same viewpoint to those with disabilities, of all ages, the reality is harsh and unforgiving. If Hollywood portrays a person with a physical or cognitive disability, whether due to aging or otherwise, as inferior, we are in danger of passively accepting this attitude and it becoming the norm.

Chivers asks the reader to see this view of the aging population as misguided, encouraging a thoughtful analysis of the characters and stories that entertain us. She offers these compelling issues within the framework of cultural gerontology, which views aging and old age as a social construct rather than biologically fixed.

Chivers' insightful examination of film over the last half century and its influence over Western society's view of aging and disability is an attentive, important, and necessary one. This book is a crucial read for those in film studies, cultural studies, and disability studies, pushing a focus towards what it means to age in a society that dismisses its aging population and is so willing to portray them as narrow and weak in film.

Amanda T. McLaughlin is an assistant editor for the *Review of Disability Studies* at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Media Communications with an emphasis in Film. You may contact her at amandat2@hawaii.edu.