

## Changing the Scripts: Midlife Women's Sexuality in Contemporary U.S. Film

Rose Weitz

Published online: 9 September 2009  
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2009

**Abstract** This article examines the portrayal of midlife women's sexuality in 13 recent U.S. narrative films. Content analysis of these films suggests that film portrayals of midlife women's sexuality are relatively muted, with the most positive portrayals found in the broadest comedies. In addition, midlife women's bodies are more often displayed as objects of humor than as objects of desire, the "female gaze" at the male body is shown only humorously, and midlife women's sexuality is primarily validated for slim, white, middle-class women in committed romantic relationships with "age-appropriate" partners. Nevertheless, these films suggest that midlife women should have sexual desires, should act on those desires, should experience sexual pleasure, and should not sacrifice their sexual needs for a man's approval.

**Keywords** Women · Midlife · Aging · Film

### Introduction

In 2006, the oldest of the 78 million U.S. baby boomers turned 60 while the youngest (typically defined as those born in 1964) moved toward their mid-40s. Not coincidentally, a spate of popular articles and books appeared arguing that midlife sexuality was blossoming. These included *Dr. Ruth's Sex After 50*, Gail Sheehy's *Sex and the Seasoned Woman*, and the February 20, 2006 *Newsweek* cover story on "Sex and the Single Boomer: The New World of Midlife Romance."

As evidence of this cultural shift, more than one author cited Diane Keaton's brief nude scene as Jack Nicholson's lover in *Something's Gotta Give* or the

---

R. Weitz (✉)  
Women and Gender Studies, Arizona State University, Box 874902,  
Tempe, AZ 85287-4902, USA  
e-mail: rose.weitz@asu.edu; roseweitz@cox.net

continued on-screen presence of such actresses as Annette Bening and Meryl Streep (now 51 and 60 years old, respectively). To explore whether cultural acceptance of, specifically, midlife *women's* sexuality, has grown, this article examines its portrayal in recent narrative U.S. films. As I will show, these films reflect, reinforce, and challenge traditional sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1987)—cultural expectations for who, where, when, why, how, and with whom one should have sex—for midlife women's sexuality. Thus, these films both serve as markers of contemporary sexual scripts and have the potential to facilitate or dampen sexual expression among the current large cohort of midlife women as well as among succeeding generations.

Film portrayals, of course, are only half the story, for audiences neither blindly nor passively adopt these portrayals. Rather, and as with other media, cultural messages are “encoded” into films by their producers and then “decoded” by viewers (McCabe 2004; Hall 1980; Gledhill 1988). This process allows at least some individuals to read these texts in ways not intended by their creators (e.g., Radway 1983; Carey 1989; Simonds 1992; Modleski 1994; Staiger 2005). Such alternative readings are particularly likely among audiences whose life experiences differ from those typically depicted on screen, such as members of minority groups (e.g., Milkie 1999; Shively 1992). At the same time, the “preferred readings” of most films—those most deeply embedded in the structure of the film—typically reflect and reinforce values of the dominant culture. Moreover, those readings are particularly accessible to mainstream audiences which, almost by definition, share those cultural values (Hall 1980; Gledhill 1988; Currie 1999). In addition, even if individuals sometimes can avoid adopting a preferred reading of an individual film, it is difficult to do so consistently when the same dominant cultural ideas are repeatedly reinforced in film after film. Consequently, film texts remain an important subject of study separate from audience responses to those texts. Film texts are also worthy of study in their own right because they illuminate the cultural ideas that media producers either hold themselves or believe are most palatable to mainstream audiences.

## Background

Surveys show that sexual activity remains an important part of life for many midlife women (SIECUS 2002). For example, in one 2004 nationally representative sample (AARP 2004), approximately three-quarters of men and half of women ages 45–49 described sexual activity as important to their overall quality of life and approximately half of men and women ages 45–59 reported having sexual intercourse at least once a week, although sexual interest declined significantly after age 49 and sexual intercourse after age 59.<sup>1</sup> Other surveys have found similar results (SIECUS 2002).

Yet although many midlife (and older) women remain sexually active, or at least interested, their sexuality has been portrayed in film only rarely. According to Stoddard (1983), from the 1930s until the late 1970s, virtually all women over age

---

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the study reported some figures for ages 45–49 and others for 45–59.

50 in U.S. narrative films were depicted as saintly and asexual mothers, with most of the rest depicted as single, childless, asexual, and either shrewish or insane. Similarly, a survey of top-grossing films found that the likelihood of portraying sexual or romantic activity onscreen declines with age for both sexes (Bazzini et al. 1997) and a study of male and female Academy Award nominees over age 60 from 1929 to 1995 found that just under 20% of the characters they played ever engaged in sexual or romantic activities onscreen (Markson and Taylor 2000). Moreover, both these articles gave only the *total* of actresses portrayed in sexual *or* romantic activities. The number of actresses shown in sexual activity would necessarily be lower than these totals.

More generally, scholars have found that midlife (and older) women are under-represented in U.S. films. In a random sample of 100 top grossing films from the 1940s to the 1980s, men over age 35 accounted for 25% of central characters but women over 35 accounted for only 3%, with supporting characters showing a similar pattern (Bazzini et al. 1997). Other studies have found women also underrepresented among film “stars,” among academy award winners, and in top-grossing films, both recently and historically (Lincoln and Allen 2004; Lauren and Dozier 2005; Levy 1990).

The under-representation of midlife women and their sexuality in popular film partly reflects marketing considerations. Since the 1940s, studios have considered young men their prime audience, both because of young men’s high rates of film viewing and because they often drive viewing decisions for couples and families (Tally 2006). As a result, studios disproportionately produce films aimed at young men or, more recently, “cross-over” films such as *Harry Potter* that interest both young men and others (Tally 2006).

Cultural attitudes, too, undoubtedly underlie the under-representation of midlife women’s sexuality in film. Even though midlife sexuality is increasingly visible, from Madonna’s videos to *Sex and the City*’s Samantha and beyond, mainstream American culture more often than not equates sexuality with youth. This is especially true for women who, as Sontag (1972) famously described, face a “double standard of aging.” American culture generally views aging women as unattractive and (preferably) asexual, while men’s attractiveness in both the romance and job markets holds steady or even increases with age (Calasanti and Slevin 2001; Carpenter et al. 2006; Dinnerstein and Weitz 1994; Weitz 2004).

## Methods

This article is based on an analysis of U.S. narrative films released between 2000 and 2007 that portrayed sexually active midlife women. This date range best captures the current context, in which most of the vast baby boom generation has entered midlife and thus film producers have more motivation than ever before to address midlife issues. The sample includes only U.S. films both because of the practical difficulties of identifying a representative sample of foreign films and because foreign films represent only 1% of the U.S. movie market (Levy 2008). This statistics, however, understates the impact of foreign films, since increasingly these

films reach U.S. audience via cable television. Still, although individual foreign films such as *Salaam Bombay* and *The Dark Knight* occasionally attract large U.S. audiences, as a group they have relatively limited ability to affect sexual scripts in this country. Conversely, studying U.S. films is particularly important because of their disproportionate international cultural influence.

Since *characters'* ages are rarely identified, I defined films as portraying midlife women if the *actresses'* ages were between 45 and 64. Scholars vary in their definitions of midlife, with lower limits ranging from 35 to 45 years of age and upper limits set between 60 and 64. I chose 45 as my lower limit both to clarify the differences between midlife and younger women and because 45-year-old actresses typically look considerably younger and often play younger characters. I chose 64 as my upper limit because 65 remains a cultural marker of old age: both the age when Medicare coverage begins and the commonly expected (as opposed to "early") retirement age.

To create a list of relevant films for this article, I first sent queries to experts and electronic discussion groups in women's studies and film studies around the country, requesting suggestions of narrative films that depict midlife or older women as sexually active (whether positively or negatively). I did not define "midlife," "older," or "sexually active" in these queries so as to cast my net broadly. In addition, I compiled lists of films released since 2000 that won Academy Awards for best picture; that were indexed at IMDB.com under the keywords "older," "middle-aged," or "midlife" women; or whose casts included any Academy Award-winning or 100-top-grossing actresses.<sup>2</sup> Although this search strategy undoubtedly missed some films that fit my sample definition, it is unlikely that it omitted films with significant cultural impact.

After compiling my list, I first deleted any films produced outside the U.S. and any that did not include a woman ages 45–64. I then viewed all the remaining films and deleted any that did not portray a *sexually active* midlife woman. I defined a midlife woman as sexually active if she was shown or described as recently, currently, or imminently engaging in any level of heterosexual or homosexual activity, from a lingering hand on a thigh to intercourse.

These strategies left me with a total of 13 films. I then added the film *Sex and the City*—released in May 2008 after the sampling for this article was completed, but with too large an audience and potential cultural influence to omit—and deleted *I Heart Huckabees*.<sup>3</sup> The latter includes one scene in which its central character, Albert Markovski (24-year-old Jason Schwartzman), during his search for existential meaning, has passionate sex with "nihilistic philosopher" Catherine Vauban (51-year-old Isabelle Huppert) while they wallow in mud from head to toe.<sup>4</sup> However, the film is so convoluted, satiric, and surrealistic—Ebert (2004) described it as having "inexplicable" characters and no apparent plot—that I found it

<sup>2</sup> Film titles were obtained from [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), actresses' ages from [www.filmbug.com](http://www.filmbug.com), and grosses from [www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/actors.mv?actress+ByAG](http://www.the-movie-times.com/thrsdir/actors.mv?actress+ByAG), "Top Actress By Avg Box Office Gross of all movies," accessed May 2007.

<sup>3</sup> The film *Mamma Mia* appeared still later.

<sup>4</sup> The film also includes a scene in which two married "existential detectives" (67-year-old Dustin Hoffman and 65-year-old Lilly Tomlin), both just above this study's age limit, kiss passionately.

**Table 1** Surveyed films

| Film                   | Year released | Midlife actresses<br>(age at film release)                   | Midlife woman<br>as central character? |
|------------------------|---------------|--|--|
| About Schmidt          | 2002          | Kathy Bates (54)   | No                                     |
| Banger Sisters         | 2002          | Goldie Hawn (57) and<br>Susan Sarandon (57)                  | Yes                                    |
| Being Julia            | 2004          | Annette Bening (46)  | Yes                                    |
| Dirty Shame            | 2004          | Tracey Ullman (45), Mink Stole (57),<br>Susan Allenback (52) | Yes (Ullman)                           |
| Family Stone           | 2005          | Diane Keaton (59)  | No                                     |
| Hairspray              | 2007          | John Travolta (in drag) (53),<br>Michelle Pfeiffer (49)      | No                                     |
| Hours                  | 2002          | Meryl Streep (53)  | Shared                                 |
| Meet the Fockers       | 2004          | Barbara Streisand (62),<br>Blythe Danner (61)                | No                                     |
| Sex and the City       | 2008          | Kim Cattrall (52)  | No                                     |
| Something's Gotta Give | 2003          | Diane Keaton (57)  | Shared                                 |
| Tadpole                | 2002          | Susan Sarandon (57)  | No                                     |
| Under the Tuscan Sun   | 2004          | Lindsay Duncan (53)  | No                                     |
| The Wedding Crashers   | 2005          | Jane Seymour (54)  | No                                     |

impossible to decide, for example, whether the filmmaker intended audiences to sympathize with these characters, and thus impossible to code the film meaningfully and reliably. Table 1 lists the 13 films included in my final sample.

Following in the tradition of grounded theory and ethnographic content analysis (Altheide 2002, 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Dey 1993; Berg 2006), films were coded based on emergent themes developed inductively during viewing. As a list of variables emerged, the films were re-viewed and recoded to parse overlapping concepts and to look for alternative readings of the data. Each film was viewed three times.

These methods have three limitations. First, the analysis presented in this article is based on coding by a single coder. I hope that the data are described in sufficient detail for readers to judge the accuracy of the coding for themselves. At any rate, having a second coder does not necessarily reduce bias since coders often share perspectives from the start.

Second, the study covers a narrow time frame and relies solely on textual analysis. Further research is needed to explore whether the portrayals of midlife female sexuality in these films reflect long-term trends and whether diverse audiences might find alternative readings of these films. In addition, this study does not analyze the impact of friends, film reviewers, or other information sources on individuals' selection or interpretation of films—all topics worthy of further research.

Third, for reasons discussed earlier this study looks solely at U.S. films. Yet foreign films—or at least French films—have the reputation of portraying midlife female sexuality more openly and positively than do U.S. films (Abeel 2001). This

reputation has been bolstered in recent years by British films such as *Calendar Girls* and French films such as *Under the Sand* (*Sous le Sable*) and *An Affair of Love* (*Une Liaison Pornographique*). Further research is needed to determine whether this reputation is justified and to explore how midlife women's sexuality is presented in films from different nations and geographic regions.

## Results

### Sexual Absences

The first and most obvious finding is how rarely midlife women are portrayed as sexually active in contemporary U.S. films. From 2000 to 2007, more than 4,000 films were released to theatres in the U.S. (Motion Picture Association of America 2008). As noted earlier, only 13 of these films portrayed sexually active midlife women. Moreover, in only five of these 13 films was such a woman the central character, whose perspective and story shaped the core narrative arc of the film, and in only three of these (*The Banger Sisters*, *A Dirty Shame*, and *Being Julia*) did midlife women have center stage to themselves, rather than sharing it with other characters.

Second, even when midlife women are portrayed as sexually active, most of those portrayals are exceedingly subdued by contemporary standards. None of the 13 films depict women engaging in vaginal intercourse, and those that show couples pre- or post-coitus are careful to keep the women's erotic zones covered. Moreover, in only five films (*The Family Stone*, *Something's Gotta Give*, *Meet the Fockers*, *The Wedding Crashers*, and *A Dirty Shame*) does a midlife woman engage in any sexual activity beyond a brief kiss.

Of these five films, two are romantic comedies told with just enough realism for audiences potentially to extrapolate from the films to their own lives. *Something's Gotta Give* tells of the romantic and sexual awakening of divorcee Erica Barry (played by 57-year-old Diane Keaton) and of the romantic awaking of Harry Sanborn (66-year-old Jack Nicholson), who for decades has dated only much younger women without ever falling in love. After several initially hostile encounters—including disparaging questions from Harry regarding why Erica always wears turtlenecks—the two find themselves drawn to each other. They begin kissing passionately, and Erica tells Harry to cut open her turtleneck, both concretely and symbolically highlighting her sexual rebirth.

*The Family Stone* centers on the young adults in the family, although an important subplot centers on the mother, Sybil (played by then 59-year-old Diane Keaton), who is dying of breast cancer. In one scene, she and her husband lie in bed as she tells him that she is afraid. Then they kiss, she unbuttons her blouse and puts his hand on her scarlet mastectomy scar, and they kiss deeply again. This particular sequence of events, however, highlights the scene's loving rather than sexual components, especially since her remaining breast and nipple remain covered.

The three other films that showed midlife women engaging in sexual activity beyond a brief kiss are very broad comedies, and as such are much less likely to

affect audiences' understanding of cultural sexual scripts. *Meet the Fockers* is the only film in this study in which a midlife woman engages in sexual activity and younger characters do not. The film humorously shows what happens when Gaylord Focker (39-year-old Ben Stiller) brings his fiancé, Pam Byrnes, and her very conservative parents, Jack and Dina Byrnes (played by Robert De Niro and Blythe Danner, both 61 years old) home to meet his very liberal parents, Bernie and Rozalin (62-year-old Barbra Streisand and 67-year-old Dustin Hoffman). Within minutes of meeting, Bernie mentions that he and Rozalin had "a [sexual] matinee" that afternoon and jokes about getting her back into bed. Later, Gaylord and the audience accidentally see them in bed, Bernie's face and the top half of Rozalin's breasts covered with whipped cream, both seeming quite happy with their circumstances.

*The Wedding Crashers* centers on John Beckwith's struggle to capture the love of Claire Cleary (29-year-old Rachel McAdams). While John (played by 37-year-old Owen Wilson) is visiting Claire's house, her mother, Kathleen (54-year-old Jane Seymour) follows him into his bedroom, rips open her blouse, asks if he likes her new "tits," and then says, "I'm not letting you out of this room until you feel my tits." He does so, under duress, but then starts to enjoy it, after which Kathleen calls him a "pervert" and storms out. This scene simultaneously suggests that a midlife woman can be sexually desirable (at least if she has fake breasts) and portrays her as manipulative and unstable.

Finally, the film *A Dirty Shame* centers on Sylvia Stickles (played by 45-year-old Tracy Ullman), a married housewife disgusted by the very idea of sex. After she is accidentally hit on the head, she becomes a self-proclaimed "sex addict" and follower of "sexual healer" Ray-Ray Perkins (33-year-old Johnny Knoxville). In three separate scenes, we see her as Ray-Ray, her husband, and then an anonymous biker perform oral sex on her, and in one scene we see her friend, Marge (57-year-old Mink Stole) as her buttocks are fondled by another sex addict. In each case, however, the women are fully clothed and shown only from mid-chest up, while the men's actions occur off-camera. In addition, the movie is highly satiric—its climactic scene depicts a town-wide orgy of head-cracking, described as the first truly new sex act—and so it is hard to imagine audiences extrapolating from these films to their own lives. Moreover, even though the film's narrative structure encourages film-viewers to identify with Sylvia, her close-set eyes, pointed chin and nose, ill-kempt hair, and badly applied makeup limit the extent to which female film-goers will do so. Finally, whenever Sylvia is shown receiving oral sex, she moves jerkily and grimaces or otherwise contorts her face, further distancing her actions from "real world" sexuality and decreasing the odds that film-goers will make connections between the film and their own sexual lives or desires.

With this one exception, the subdued portrayals of midlife sexual activity in the surveyed films contrasts sharply with the portrayals of sexual activity among younger characters in the same films. For example, *Being Julia* stars 46-year-old Annette Bening as Julia Lambert, a star of the English stage seduced into an affair by a brash young fan, Tom Fennel (played by 24-year-old Shaun Evans). Over time, though, Tom tires of her and begins an affair with a younger woman. We learn of this affair when Julia enters his apartment and hears the sounds of a woman's passion. In contrast, Julia and Tom were only shown post-coitally.

Similarly, the film *Sex and the City* traces the lives and romances of four friends: Carrie, Charlotte, and Miranda (respectively, Sarah Jessica Parker, Kristin Davis, and Cynthia Nixon, all in their 40s) and Samantha (played by 52-year-old Kim Cattrall); in the film, Carrie is identified as 40 and Samantha as 50 years old. Miranda and her husband are twice shown in active coitus, with Miranda's body very much on display, and both Carrie and Charlotte are shown passionately kissing their lover or husband before the camera cuts to a post-coital scene. In contrast, even though Samantha is explicitly described in the film as the most sexual of the four, much of her screen time focuses on her inability to get her preoccupied lover into bed. Although she is once shown post-coitally with her lover, she is never depicted engaging in sexual activity.

Of course, since Samantha's storyline centers on her growing realization that she needs—and lacks—an active, non-monogamous sexual life, we would not expect her to be depicted as sexually active for most of the film. However, by film's end the other characters are shown enjoying their new sexual and romantic lives, whereas Samantha is merely looking forward to hers. A more coherent narrative arc would have ended with Samantha, too, in her new life, actively reveling in her new sexual freedom.

### Sexual Gazes: Female Bodies

Modern film-making is largely characterized by the male gaze: a lingering look that sexualizes the female body and provides sexual pleasure to the male gazer (Mulvey 1975). In sharp contrast, such a gaze occurs in only five of the 13 surveyed films (*A Dirty Shame*, *Tadpole*, *Meet the Fockers*, *Hairspray*, and *Something's Gotta Give*).

In *Tadpole*, 15-year-old Oscar believes he is in love with his step-mother, Eve (53-year-old Sigourney Weaver, playing a 40-year-old), and lovingly and slowly moves his eyes over her face and body when he first sees her. And although early in *Something's Gotta Give*, Harry (Jack Nicholson) covers his eyes in horror when he accidentally sees Erica Barry (Diane Keaton) nude, in two later scenes both he and Erica's much younger lover, Julian Mercer (39-year-old Keanu Reeves), gaze with admiration at her body.

More humorously, in *A Dirty Shame*, we see an anonymous sex addict leering at the buttocks of Sylvia's friend Marge, his tongue hanging and fingers twiddling in mid-air, while in *Meet the Fockers*, Gaylord Focker, under the influence of "truth serum," points to his future mother-in-law and declares, "'I'm a lookin' and [his voice dropping to a husky drawl] 'I'm a likin'.'" Finally, in *Hairspray*, a highly satirical musical centered on high school student Tracy Turnblad (Nikki Blonsky), Tracy's parents, Wilbur and Edna (played by 54-year-old Christopher Walken and 53-year-old John Travolta, in drag), affirm their love through song. Edna sings "You'll always be first string" while slowly tugging her dress slightly above her knee, and Wilbur replies "Ring-a-ding-ding," while arching his eyebrows and gazing at her. The song ends with Edna lying on a chaise lounge, as Wilbur leans over her and blows out the candle illuminating the scene. Any sexual impact of this scene, however, is constrained by the film's satiric nature, the inherent unreality of the musical format, and the audience's knowledge that Edna is played by a man.

Conversely, five of the 13 films *never* show the midlife female body as object of the male gaze (*Being Julia*, *The Banger Sisters*, *The Hours*, *The Wedding Crashers*, and *The Family Stone*) and three films display that body only as an object of humor or horror. *About Schmidt* follows Warren Schmidt (Jack Nicholson) as he searches for meaning after his retirement and his wife's sudden death. While visiting his daughter in Denver, he stays with his daughter's future mother-in-law, Roberta (54-year-old Kathy Bates). Roberta suggests that he soothe his aching back by relaxing in her hot tub, and then, to his surprise, joins him, naked, in the tub, and places her hand on his thigh. Warren recoils in horror and almost runs away. Although audiences are unlikely to view this scene fully through Schmidt's eyes—the film is told from his perspective, but he is depicted as having led an empty life with which few would want to identify—they are also not likely to view it through Bates's eyes, since she is depicted as inappropriately sexual, manipulative, and bitter.

The sight of the female midlife body is similarly rejected in *Under the Tuscan Sun*. The film centers on the love life of Frances Mayes (played by 38-year-old Diane Lane). In one scene, Frances accidentally stumbles upon her friend Katherine (53-year-old Lindsay Duncan) posing nude for Katherine's artist-lover. The camera shows this scene through Frances's eyes, and so positions the audience to identify with Frances's obvious shock and horror at the sight.

Finally, in *Sex and the City*, Samantha's final attempt to get her lover into bed consists of laboriously making sushi and then lying face up and nude on the dining room table, sushi discreetly positioned on her body as she awaits his return. The image is more humorous than sexual from the start, and turns to ridiculous as time passes, the sushi decay, and her lover fails to appear. Although the film's narrative positions the audience to sympathize with Samantha, the audience cannot help but notice—and laugh at—her humiliation.

### Sexual Gazes: Male Bodies

Given that films based around male sexuality routinely exhibit the male gaze at female bodies, we might expect that films depicting female sexuality might display a “female gaze” at the male body. In fact, only 3 of the 13 films exhibit a female gaze, and all three use it as a source of humor.

As mentioned, in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, the audience sees Katherine posing nude for her young lover, gazing at him as he gazes at her. However, the audience is primed to view this through Frances's eyes as humorously inappropriate at best, a sense reinforced later in the film when Katherine's lover abandons her and leaves her disconsolate. Similarly, in the opening scenes of *Sex and the City*, Samantha and her girlfriends walk down the street, notice a sexy young man, and turn their heads in unison to follow him, only to see him kiss another man. Later in the film, Samantha, in despair over her sparse sex life, watches her sexy neighbor as he slowly strips off his wet-suit and showers on his patio, the camera slowing down to suggest the intentness of her gaze. When he notices she is looking and invites her to join him, she is so flustered that she flees, ending this scene also on a humorous rather than sexy note.

The female gaze is also a source of humor in *The Banger Sisters*. The film focuses on two former best friends, Suzette and Lavinia (respectively, Goldie Hawn and Susan Sarandon, both 57 years old), once known as the Banger Sisters because of their many sexual conquests. When the film starts, Lavinia has settled into domesticity while Suzette is desperately trying to hold onto her youthful lifestyle and looks. In the movie's first scenes, Suzette scans the bar where she works, first lingering on the handsome lead singer and then on the bodies of the handsome young men in the crowd, before noticing to her chagrin the beautiful bodies of the much younger women customers. In despair, she drinks a beer, which leads her boss to fire her. As she leaves the bar and enters the parking lot, she sees the lead singer sitting at the steering wheel of his car, his face turned towards hers. Believing that he is looking at her, she struts towards him, swinging her hips, only to see the head of a young woman rise up from between his legs. Thus, in both these scenes, as in *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Sex and the City*, the female gaze is an object of humor for the audience and brings discomfort, emotional pain, or humiliation to the gazer.

### Affirming Sexuality

Despite the ways in which midlife women's sexuality is minimized in the surveyed films, overall they suggest that sexuality is a necessary and valuable part of life for midlife women. This theme is clearest in the films *Something's Gotta Give*, *Meet the Fockers*, *A Dirty Shame*, and *Sex and the City*.

Early in *Something's Gotta Give*, Erica Barry (Diane Keaton) is chided by her sister for her lack of a love life. Erica responds, "I like staying in and I like this time of my life. Why do I have to defend myself? I was married for 20 years: I'm done!" Later, however, after she opens her heart and body to Harry, she declares "Oh my god! I do like sex!" After this, she abandons her previous turtlenecks for far more revealing and sexy outfits, begins a long-term relationship with the much younger Julian, and eventually enters a happy, committed, romantic and sexual relationship with Harry.

The importance of sexuality for both men and women at midlife is even more central to *Meet the Fockers*. Whereas the Byrnes parents (Jack and Dina) have sex only on their anniversary, the Focker parents (Bernie and Rozalin) are extremely physically affectionate and talk openly and joyfully about their sexual desires. An important subplot centers on Rozalin and Dina's attempts to encourage Jack to become more sexual. The film ends happily at their children's wedding, when Jack asks Rozalin to teach him some of her sexual tricks and then steals away with Dina to their bedroom.

More extremely, the central thesis of *A Dirty Shame* is that sexuality of all sorts (from cunnilingus to exhibitionism to secretly defecating in public places) should be celebrated by everyone. The film centers around the battle between a town's self-described "neuters," who revile sex, and its self-described "sex addicts," who triumph in the end.

Similarly, Samantha's central goal in *Sex and the City* is to enjoy her sexuality to its fullest. Although as noted earlier, her sexuality is often used as a source of

humor, without question the movie portrays it as a necessary and valued part of her life, something she could not and should not change.

The value of female sexuality is also affirmed through the sadness felt by women who lose or lack good sexual relationships in *Tadpole*, *Being Julia* and *Under the Tuscan Sun*; in *The Family Stone*'s depiction (described earlier) of the solace a dying woman receives from a loving and sexual marriage; in *Hairspray*'s portrayal of Edna's joyful sexualization as she comes to view herself as beautiful and loved despite her weight; and in the implied sexualization of the over-domesticated Lavinia in *The Banger Sisters*, who changes from an uptight suburban matron with an all-beige wardrobe into someone who smokes marijuana, drinks, dances, and wears colorful, flowing clothes—a transformation her husband appears to enjoy and which could well extend to their sex life. Similarly, throughout most of *The Hours*, Clarissa Vaughan (played by 53-year-old Meryl Streep) focuses her energies on her dying ex-lover. However, as the film moves toward resolution after his death, we see Clarissa return home, remove her coat and scarf, let down her hair, smile, and pull her long-ignored lover, Sally (43-year-old Allison Janney), into a kiss. In our final view of Clarissa, she smiles, turns off the hall light in their apartment, and walks into their bedroom, suggesting that she has come to her senses and will now enjoy a healthy emotional and sexual relationship with Sally.

In contrast, only *About Schmidt* and *The Wedding Crashers* offer no sympathy to sexually active midlife women. Importantly, both these exceptions involve predatory women forcing their sexual desires on men outside of committed relationships, a topic discussed further below.

### Sexual Agency

Not only do the films overall suggest that midlife women should enjoy a sexual life, they also offer some support for women's sexual pleasure and sexual agency. Unlike many U.S. films or, for that matter, U.S. culture in general (Phillips 2000; De Lauretis 1990; Finlay and Fenton 2005), none of the surveyed films suggest that women should put a man's sexual pleasure or emotional needs ahead of their own sexual desires. Rather, all the films seem to value egalitarian sexual and emotional relationships.

Moreover, of the 11 surveyed films that depict the initiation of sexual activity, nine portray a midlife woman as either the sole initiator or a co-initiator. By films' end, five of these women are rewarded with happy sexual relationships, one (Samantha of *Sex and the City*) is happily single with prospects for a rollicking sex life, and only three—all of whom sought sexual contact outside of committed relationships—find themselves sexually rejected.

### Sexual Boundaries

As this suggests, these films typically affirm midlife women's sexuality only if properly restrained. That restraint takes three forms: valorizing sexuality primarily within committed relationships, within "age-appropriate" couples, and among white, middle-class, slim women.

### Valorizing Relational Sexuality

As a group, the surveyed films validate midlife women's sexuality only within romantic relationships (cf. Tally 2006). Although nine of the films portray women who seek sexual activity extramaritally or outside of a romantic relationship, only two of these films (*Sex and the City* and *A Dirty Shame*) end with women still enjoying non-relational sexuality. In contrast, Suzette in *The Banger Sisters* ends the film in a happy romantic relationship, Kathleen in *The Wedding Crashers* appears to receive no pleasure from pressuring her daughter's beau to fondle her breasts and thereafter is portrayed as an unhappy drunk, and the various midlife women who sought non-relational sexuality in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, *About Schmidt*, *Hairspray*, *Being Julia* and *Tadpole* all humiliatingly fail to get or keep their desired man's attention.<sup>5</sup> The other four films all end with their midlife female characters happily ensconced in committed relationships.

### Older Women, Younger Men

For decades, Hollywood films have depicted male actors happily settling down with much younger women, such as Harrison Ford with Anne Heche in *Six Days, Seven Nights*, Jack Nicholson with Helen Hunt in *As Good as It Gets*, and Woody Allen in many of his films. In contrast, Hollywood's best remembered depictions of relationships between midlife women and younger men all portray the women as desperate and almost vampiric, such as Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*, Anne Bancroft in *The Graduate* (36 years old at the time but playing an older woman), and Chloris Leachman in *The Last Picture Show*. The films in this sample similarly suggest that it is best to limit sexual and romantic relationships to age peers.

Although seven of the 13 surveyed films depict sexual contacts between older women and younger men, none ends with these relationships intact. In *Sex and the City*, Samantha happily ends a long-term relationship with a loving young man, primarily because she realizes she is not cut out for relationships, and in *Something's Gotta Give*, Erica happily leaves the handsome, sexy, loving, and much younger Julian for the older, cantankerous, unattractive, and formerly cradle-robbing Harry.

The other five films are considerably more cautionary. *Tadpole*, *The Wedding Crashers*, *Being Julia*, and *Under the Tuscan Sun* all end with the midlife women unhappy, drunk, or both. In addition, the first three of these end with with the younger men in more age-appropriate relationships. (The fourth, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, does not say what happens to the young man after he leaves his older lover.) Similarly, whereas Suzette in *The Banger Sisters* is humiliated when she mistakenly assumes that a younger man is interested in her, she eventually finds love and happiness with the age-appropriate—but unattractive and obsessive—compulsive—Harry (played by Geoffrey Rush).

<sup>5</sup> However, Eve's friend, Diane (44-year-old Bebe Neuwirth—just under this sample's age limit, playing a 40-year-old, and in a more minor role), thoroughly enjoys seducing Oscar and seems unperturbed by the brevity of their sexual relationship.

*Race, Class, and Size*

None of the surveyed films provide any models of midlife sexuality among women of color.<sup>6</sup> Thus, by omission they validate midlife sexuality only for white women.

The absence of sexualized portrayals of women of color in these films primarily reflects the near-absence of *any* portrayals of women of color in mainstream U.S. media. Still, the absence of sexually active women of color in the surveyed films is somewhat surprising, given centuries-old cultural stereotypes that depict women of color as especially sexual (Weitz 2004, 2010). For example, as Collins (2000, 2004) has noted, stereotypes of African American as sexually wanton “jezebels” and promiscuous, constantly pregnant “welfare mothers” occur repeatedly in mainstream American media. Latinas, too, have often been stereotyped as hypersexual (Guzmán and Valdivia 2004). At the same time, however, Collins has also identified recurring stereotypes of African American women as “mammies” and “matriarchs,” suggesting very different stereotypes of younger and older African American women. Similarly, films often contrast sexy young Latinas with their older, asexual and even anti-sexual mothers and *dueñas*. Further research using samples that focus on midlife women of color will be needed to ascertain which of these stereotypes is now more common.

In addition to validating sexuality primarily for white women, the surveyed films also appear to validate sexuality for middle-class, slim women more than for other women. Three of the thirteen films depict sexually active midlife women who are clearly working class (Suzette in *The Banger Sisters*, Edna in *Hairspray*, and Sylvia in *A Dirty Shame*). All three of these films intend us to sympathize with these characters, each of whom by films’ end is in a fulfilling sexual and romantic relationship. Thus, these films as a group appear to validate sexuality among working class as well as more affluent women. On the other hand, Suzette begins the film as a barmaid and ends it in the more middle-class position of author’s muse, Sylvia appears in a highly satirical film, and Edna is played by a man in drag and appears in a film that is both a musical and highly satirical. All these elements *decrease* the chances that viewers will extrapolate from these films to real life and, if they do so anyway, *increase* the chances that the films will encourage viewers to consider working class women’s sexuality an appropriate target for broad humor.

Finally, and unsurprisingly given current Hollywood and American norms, most of the midlife women whose sexuality is celebrated in these films are slim. In contrast, the one woman character whose sexuality is rejected throughout is Roberta in *About Schmidt*. This rejection makes sense within the film’s narrative given both her character flaws and the personality differences between her and Warren Schmidt, the man she attempts to seduce. On the other hand, in an earlier scene Warren drunkenly makes a pass at a married woman, indicating that he does have sexual desires. As a result, we are left to wonder whether her rejection is partly due to her very full figure.

---

<sup>6</sup> For two striking counter-examples involving women characters just outside the age range covered in this article, see *How the Garcia Girls Spent Their Summer* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*.

In contrast, the fat midlife female body is acknowledged as sexual in *A Dirty Shame* and is celebrated in *Hairspray*. In the former, Sylvia's husband knocks on the door of neighbor Betty Doggett—played by full-figured, 52-year-old Susan Allenback—and Betty and her husband come to the door completely nude and smiling broadly, suggesting that they had been enjoying themselves sexually. In the latter, Wilbur is oblivious to the sexual advances of the skinny but evil Velma (49-year-old Michelle Pfeiffer) and tells his wife, Edna, that “this heart beats only for a size 60,” while Edna sings “I’m big, blonde, and beautiful” and, later, “If you don’t like the way I look, well, I just don’t give a damn!” As noted earlier, however, these two films are the most satiric of the 13, thus moderating any effects they might have on audiences.

## Discussion

The films in this sample suggest both the ways in which film portrayals of midlife women’s sexuality may be improving as well as the limits on those changes. On the one hand, it remains true that only a tiny fraction of narrative films currently portray midlife women’s sexuality, that those portrayals are quite muted compared to current film conventions, and that the films that portray midlife women’s sexuality most positively are also the most comedic. And whereas U.S. films in general are characterized by the relentless sexualization of the female body, in the surveyed films women’s bodies are more often displayed as objects of humor than objects of desire. Similarly, the “female gaze” at the male body is also shown only humorously, with the women always paying a price for using it. In addition, as a group these films validate midlife women’s sexuality primarily for slim, white, middle-class women in committed romantic relationships with partners of similar ages.

On the other hand, to have any positive portrayals of midlife women’s sexuality at all seems a considerable step forward. Moreover, as a group these films suggest that midlife women should have sexual desires, should act on those desires, should experience sexual pleasure, and should not kill their own sexual needs for a man’s approval or desires—a considerably more positive message than that found in many U.S. films or in popular culture more broadly.

What, then, does this suggest for the future? In the end, filmmakers will, by and large, follow the money. More positive depictions of midlife women’s sexuality will, therefore, depend on filmmakers’ changing understanding of the film audience. As a group, baby boomers appear to have more liberal attitudes than previous generations toward female sexuality and toward sexuality across the life course (Carpenter et al. 2007). Moreover, like everyone else, baby boomers enjoy seeing characters like themselves on screen. Filmmakers who recognize this may also recognize that they can sell films that validate midlife female sexuality—including those with *R* ratings—to this very large audience. Similarly, as Tally (2006) suggests, the existence of a small but growing number of female film director/producers who have the power to produce projects of their choosing (including middle-aged stars such as Sigourney Weaver and Barbra Streisand) may also result

in more films centered on midlife women in future; indeed, two of the 13 films in this study (*Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Something's Gotta Give*) were written and directed by women, one (*Tadpole*) was co-written by a woman, and one (*Hairspray*) was written by a woman based on a musical written by men. For all these reasons, we may expect to see more films in future that offer positive portrayals of midlife women's sexuality. In fact, between the time this article was submitted and the time it was accepted, at least two new films fitting this description—*Mamma Mia* and *Julie and Julia*—were released.

Other media also seem increasingly to recognize the financial potential of the female baby boomer market. The internet, of course, offers a wealth of blogs, videos, films, and web sites that tightly target audiences, including midlife women interested in romance and sexuality. Similarly, the plethora of cable channels has allowed the emergence of channels that focus on midlife women (most importantly, The Lifetime Channel). In addition, Bravo draws midlife women to its many films, while TNT is home to *The Closer* and *Saving Grace*, both of which star sexually active midlife women.

Meanwhile, “cougars”—midlife women who seek relationships (or at least sex) with younger men—have become a cultural phenomenon on television, in newspapers, and elsewhere. On NBC's *Age of Love*, 40-something Cougars compete with 20-something Kittens for a man's affections, while on TV Land's *The Cougar*, men in their 20s compete for the affections of one 40-year-old woman. Of course, all the women on these shows are taut, dyed, trim, energetic, and fit, and all but one so far have been in their early 40s, so audiences may not necessarily interpret these shows as validating the sexuality of older, average looking, midlife women. Nevertheless, the “cougar phenomenon” also suggests a growing recognition of the sexual potential of at least some midlife women.

**Acknowledgments** This article benefited greatly from the expert advice of Peter Lehman, Aaron Baker, and, especially, Joseph Eschrich, Georganne Scheiner, and Laura Carpenter.

## References

- AARP. (2004). *Sexuality at midlife and beyond: 2004 update of attitudes and behaviors*. Washington, DC: American Association of Retired Persons.
- Abeel, E. (2001, June 17). To the French, femmes over 50 are still fatale. *New York Times*, B13.
- Altheide, D. (2002). *Creating fear: News and the construction of crisis*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Altheide, D. (2006). *Ethnographic content analysis. Encyclopedia of social science research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Bazzini, D., McIntosh, W. D., Smith, S. M., Cook, S., & Harris, C. (1997). The aging woman in popular film: Underrepresented, unattractive, unfriendly, and unintelligent. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 36, 531–543.
- Berg, B. L. (2006). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences* (6th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Calasanti, T. M., & Slevin, K. F. (2001). *Gender, social inequalities, and aging*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Carey, J. W. (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Carpenter, L. M., Nathanson, C. A., & Young, J. K. (2006). Sex After 40: Gender, ageism, and sexual partnering in midlife. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 20, 93–106.

- Carpenter, L. M., Nathanson, C. A., & Young J. K. (2007). Physical women, emotional men: Gender and sexual satisfaction in midlife. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 38, 87–107.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender, and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Currie, D. H. (1999). *Girl talk: Adolescent magazines and their readers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- De Lauretis, T. (1990). Guerrilla in the midst: Women's cinema in the 80s. *Screen*, 31, 6–25.
- Dey, I. (1993). *Qualitative data analysis: A user friendly guide for social scientists*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dinnerstein, M., & Weitz, R. (1994). Jane Fonda, Barbara Bush and other aging bodies: Femininity and the limits of resistance. *Feminist Issues*, 14, 3–24.
- Ebert, R. (2004). I heart Huckabees. <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041007/REVIEWS/40920003/1023>. Accessed July 2008.
- Finlay, S., & Fenton, N. (2005). "If you've got a vagina and an attitude, that's a deadly combination": Sex and heterosexuality in *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence*, and *Disclosure*. *Sexualities*, 8, 49–74.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gledhill, C. (1988). Pleasurable negotiations. In E. D. Pribram (Ed.), *Female spectators: Looking at film and television* (pp. 64–79). London: Verso.
- Guzmán, I. M., & Valdivia, A. N. (2004). Brain, brow, and booty. *Communication Review*, 7, 205–221.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language* (pp. 128–138). London: Hutchinson.
- Lauren, M. M., & Dozier, D. M. (2005). Maintaining the double standard: Portrayals of age and gender in popular films. *Sex Roles*, 52, 437–446.
- Levy, E. (1990). Stage, sex and suffering. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 8, 53–76.
- Levy, E. (2008). Foreign film in America: Decline or demise. <http://www.emmanuellevy.com/article.php?articleID=4>. Accessed Aug 2008.
- Lincoln, A. E., & Allen, M. P. (2004). Double jeopardy in Hollywood: Gender and age effects on the careers of film actors. *Sociological Forum*, 19, 611–631.
- Markson, E. W., & Taylor, C. A. (2000). The mirror has two faces. *Aging and Society*, 20, 137–160.
- McCabe, J. (2004). *Feminist film studies*. London, UK: Wallflower.
- Milkie, M. (1999). Social comparisons, reflected appraisals, and mass media: The impact of pervasive beauty images on black and white girls' self-concepts. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 62, 190–210.
- Modleski, T. (1994). *Loving with a vengeance: Mass produced fantasies for women*. London: Routledge.
- Motion Picture Association of America. (2008). *U.S. theatrical statistics, 1946–2007*. Washington, DC: Motion Picture Association of America.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16, 6–18.
- Phillips, L. M. (2000). *Flirting with danger*. New York: New York University Press.
- Radway, J. (1983). Women read the romance. *Feminist Studies*, 9, 53–78.
- Shively, J. (1992). Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of western films among American Indians and Anglos. *American Sociological Review*, 57, 725–734.
- SIECUS. (2002). *Fact sheet: Sexuality in middle and later life*. New York, NY: SIECUS.
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1987). Sexual scripts: Permanence and change. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 15, 97–120.
- Simonds, W. (1992). *Women and self-help culture: Reading between the lines*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Sontag, S. (1972). *The double standard of aging*. October: Saturday Review.
- Staiger, J. (2005). *Media reception studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Stoddard, K. M. (1983). *Saints and shrews: Women and aging in American popular film*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Tally, M. (2006). 'She doesn't let age define her': Sexuality and motherhood in recent 'middle-aged chick flicks'. *Sexuality and Culture*, 10, 33–55.
- Weitz, R. (2004). *Rapunzel's daughters: What women's hair tells us about women's lives*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
- Weitz, R. (2010). A history of women's bodies. In R. Weitz (Ed.), *Politics of women's bodies* (pp. 3–12). New York: Oxford.