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Gerontology Institute  
University of Massachusetts Boston  
100 Morrissey Blvd.  
Boston, MA 02125-3393  
Call: (617) 287-7300; fax: (617) 287-7080  
e-mail: [gerontology@umb.edu](mailto:gerontology@umb.edu)

Gerontology Institute website: <http://www.geront.umb.edu/>

Osher Life Long Learning Institute website: <http://www.oli.umb.edu>

# **Study Guide:**

## **The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels**

### **Introduction**

#### *For Facilitators and Discussion Leaders*

The background information and many of the questions for discussion contained in this study guide seemed essential since the *Elderquest*, its history, its nature, and its implications are such new subjects, ones that have been researched, developed, and tested by Chuck Nicholas and the other members of the project staff.

The insistence that all facilitators have masters in the humanities or gerontology is, on the other hand, a requirement that the National Endowment for the Humanities builds into all its educational program grants. To maintain this level of expertise, you should at least come up with people who are both experienced teachers and also have a special interest in film, literature, and/or aging.

In short, we are fully confident that you will all do an excellent job introducing your students to this new, timely, entertaining and yet extremely important subject, one that promises to have a direct personal impact on its participants.

With the exception of the films and novels to be considered, everything that follows should be thought of, therefore, as advice and suggestion, a set of guidelines rather than a list of requirements. Use what you need and supplement it with your own intuitions and expertise. Audiences will vary and so will expectations. For example, in our experimentation with this curriculum, we have discovered that some students take exception to being told anything about a film before watching it. While we don't think that you should allow this resistance to prevent you from spelling out themes and techniques to be on the look out for, you will definitely have to be aware of some initial opposition to such an approach. Besides, since all these narratives are variations on the same important story, it won't take long for your students to want to point out these similarities and differences for themselves.

Most importantly, perhaps, one must realize that this is a program that (with the exception of the first presentation) does not allow much time for straight lecturing and/or the in-class transfer of the background material included in the study guide. That's why this online component of the program is so important. It will allow both students and facilitators to supplement their in-class viewings and discussions with all of the material posted here.

Since you will not have access to the long distance training for facilitators provided in the original NEH grant, we have added more tips about running the class to make the most of its unique format. We have also provided an outline along with the titles of relevant film clips to use in the first class.

Good Luck,

Wichian Rojanawon, Ph.D.  
Project Director

Chuck Nicholas, Ph.D.  
Program Director

*For Students*

Even though Part One of this guide was designed originally for facilitators, all students are urged to read it closely as well. The program consists primarily of screenings and discussions, so there is little time, after the first session, for your facilitators to elaborate on all this relevant material. Therefore, the more familiar you are with it the better.

This may also be the place to remind you that this is a course and therefore each session will build on what was seen, read, or discussed before. The final session will therefore be doubly crucial since that is when everyone will be asked to assess all these *Elderquests* and their implications—for the humanities, for aging in general, and for themselves.

Good Luck and Enjoy,

Wichian Rojanawon, Ph.D.  
Project Director

Chuck Nicholas, Ph.D.  
Program Director

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## ***Part One:***

### **The Program and its Rationale**

#### **Syllabus and Course Description**

*The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels* is a new course made possible by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) entitled *Examining a New Model for Old Age in Literature and Film*.

Note: Although this course is free and open to all, it does require advance registration.

Elder heroes behave very differently from younger ones. Their journeys are often inward rather than outward, backward rather than forward, slow and intentional rather than fast and impetuous. But their actions are just as heroic, if not more so, for the stakes are higher, time is short, and the flesh is weak. Victory, and it's far from guaranteed, is full acceptance and then transcendence of the self, an authentication of one's experience and then a willingness to let it go as one helps others to prepare for the ascendancy of the next generation.

Join us as our elder heroes—men and women, Swedish, American, and Brazilian—hit the road to show us what old age, and especially the new old age, is really about.

The facilitator will introduce each film (five or six minutes). Then, after we have spent one and a half to two hours watching the film and taking a break, there will be a 45-minute guided discussion of its themes and how they relate to our own experience of so-called old age.

The course will also involve reading and discussing two *Elderquest* novels.

#### **Session One: An Introduction to the *Elderquest***

Here we will introduce and define the *elderquest* with the use of clips from a number of *elderquest* films arranged according to those essential components of the form defined in Handout Six: **Plotting the *Elderquest* and Using *Wild Strawberries* as a Prototype**. (Note: The Syllabus and Course Description, Handout Two, Defining the *elderquest*, and The Introduction and Study Questions for **Wild Strawberries** should also be distributed at this class. Clips to come from any of the following: **The Winter Guest, The Straight Story, Wrestling Ernest Hemingway, The Talent Given Us, Harry and Tonto, Central Station**, etc.

#### **Session Two: The Prototype for the Modern *Elderquest*: *Wild Strawberries*.**

Victor Sjöström, Bibi Andersson, Max von Sydow, 1957. (Swedish; with new, easy to read subtitles). Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. An aging professor, on the road to accept an award, must come to terms with his past as well as his present. Rated by one international survey as among the 20 best films of all times. B/W, 1 hr., 30 mins. added features, including a film-length commentary by Peter Cowie.

#### **Session Three: Coming Home: Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*.**

Geraldine Page, John Heard, Rebecca DeMornay, 1985. Directed by Peter Masterson from a Horton Foote screenplay. Best Actress Award: Page. An aging woman, living in a small apartment with her son and his wife, returns to Bountiful, her childhood home,

even though it no longer exists, and the trip provides her with “more than enough to last me for the rest of my life.” Color, 1 hr., 47 mins.<sup>1</sup>

**Session Four: Hitting the Road Again: David Lynch’s *The Straight Story*. 1999.**

This gem of a movie by David Lynch chronicles a trip made by 73-year-old Alvin Straight from Laurens, Iowa, to Mt. Zion, Wis. in 1994 while riding a lawn mower. He takes this strange journey to mend his relationship with his ill, estranged, 75-year-old brother Lyle, and it is a superb example of late-life revitalization and transformation. Richard Farnsworth’s performance earned him Golden Globe and Oscar nominations for best actor. At 79, he is the oldest to be so honored. Color, 112 mins.

**Session Five: From Despair to Integrity: Part One: Brazil’s Central Station.**

Fernanda Montenegro and Vinicius de Oliveira, 1998 (Portuguese with excellent subtitles). This Brazilian masterpiece may be the best intergenerational film ever made. It is also an excellent example of an *Elderquest*, a middle passage, desperately needed and successfully completed. Dona Dora, old, angry, and totally hopeless, writes letters for the young, illiterate, and still hopeful in Rio’s Central Station, and then throws them away. But she is gradually and against her will drawn into the life of nine-year-old Josue whose mother writes a letter trying to reunite him with his father and is then run over by a bus. Dora is slow to rehumanize, and Josue is equally slow to let down his barriers and begin once again to hope, but they embark on an endless odyssey in search of both of their lost fathers, and eventually the letter writer rewrites her own script as well as the boy’s. Heartbreaking, realistic, and finally revelatory story of how the life review can give us the power to redefine not only our own lives, but those of our descendants as well. Color, 106 mins.

**Session Six: From Despair to Integrity: Part Two: Paule Marshall’s novel, *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).**

Seventy-something Avey (short for Avatar) Johnson, a middle class widow, jumps ship in mid-cruise to rediscover her Afro-Caribbean roots and re-establish her identity in a harrowing and heroic *Elderquest*.

**Session Seven: A Failed *Elderquest*: Alexander Payne’s *About Schmidt*. 2002.**

Jack Nicholson as Warren Schmidt, a clueless 65-year-old retired insurance executive from Omaha, sets out on an hilarious but doomed *Elderquest* in the huge camper his recently deceased wife had bought for traveling in their golden years. But he is so shut down emotionally that his encounters—with his daughter, her fiancé and her fiancé’s mother (Kathy Bates)—all end badly. Based on a novel by Louis Begley, which is totally different—not an *Elderquest*, and about a successful, upper-crust insurance executive from New York City who retires to Long Island. Color, 124 mins.

**Session Eight: Summing Up: Ethan Canin’s novel, *Carry Me Across the Water* (2001).**

August Kleinman, a successful retired Jewish brewer, takes off in his mid-seventies to redeem himself and restore his integrity by returning to Japan to confront the descendants of a Japanese officer he has killed in the south Pacific in WWII. Another harrowing but heroic *Elderquest*.

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1. p. 57 Foote, Horton, **Collected Plays: Volume One**. Lyme, NH: A Smith and Krause Book. 1996.

***Handout One:***

***The Seven Challenges of Elderhood and the Second Half of Life***

*Note:* This, one of the best lists ever compiled about the challenges as well as the promises of old age, is included here to tickle your brain and introduce you to the kinds of issues raised by the films and novels you are about to enjoy and discuss.

***“Elder tales (two percent of the world’s fairy tales) present a coherent psychological map of the tasks individuals must negotiate in the second half of life—warning of the difficulties and dangers, and previewing the promise and potential.”***

1. Dealing with the specter of decline and the reality of multiple losses in later life.
2. Self-confrontation (understanding one’s dark side) and self-reformation (moving toward worldly wisdom).
3. Turning from the youthful preoccupation with things—manipulating objects and accumulating possessions—to an empathic understanding of human nature.
4. Breaking free of the personal ambitions and dreams which dominate youth. The higher self, society, or God replaces the ego as the driving force in life.
5. Breaking from the pragmatic rationality that dominates the middle years and liberating oneself from social customs.
6. The reclamation of wonder and delight.
7. Using the transcendent inspirations of later life to help the next generation, balancing numinous revelations with the pragmatic needs of human society.

From Allen B. Chinen, **In the Ever After: Fairy Tales and the Second Half of Life** Wilmette, ILL: Chiron Publications, 1989.



## ***Handout Two:***

### **Defining the *Elderquest***

*The Elderquest*, the most frequent and compelling of today's new aging narratives, has never been identified, labeled, or studied as a serious and insightful approach to the nature and meaning of the new old age, even though there are already 40 examples in recent films and novels, more appear each year, and all tell roughly the same story.

An older woman or man sets out on a hazardous journey, often uncertain of why and apparently ill prepared. There is, however, an urgent if mysterious call to depart—a dream of one's own death, an unsettling personal encounter, a change of residence, a death or an illness in the family. Progress is fitful, unpredictable, and slow; and the vehicle of choice tends to be homely and ill suited—a bus that breaks down or goes to the wrong places, an antique Packard, a used riding mower, a stolen jeep. Some of these elder questers even hitchhike or pick up other hitchhikers along the way. There's invariably a guide, and often there are several—a daughter-in-law, a teen age runaway, a twelve-year-old boy, friends and relatives from the past, even a local sheriff. Frequently, there's a sense of amusement or astonishment that these elder questers have had the courage (or lack of sense) to set out at all, but a sense of urgency nearly always accompanies them even when their lack of progress seems pitiable or funny. But the farther they go, the more unpredictable their adventures become, the more one believes in the rightness of their decisions and the benefits that they seem to derive from them.

They're not running away from anything (as are the young heroes—or antiheroes—of the road movies they seem to be imitating), nor are they in conflict with anyone or anything outside themselves (as are the heroes who set off to do battle against the world in life's earlier quests). They are instead open-hearted and intensely vulnerable, intent only on completing themselves—by going home, by revisiting the past (but only to salvage what they need and to let go of the rest), by visiting old haunts and old loves or making new, equally important connections. They listen to those who are also open-hearted and sympathetic, but they refuse to listen to anyone, family included, who tells them what they should do and how they should feel.

Finally, and most astonishingly, nearly all these elder questers successfully complete their improbable and eventually transformative journeys and reap their rewards—a new sense of integrity, a greater capacity for love, and eventually the courage to let it all go and help the young to prepare for the ascendancy of the next generation.

***Handout Three:***

**Eight Ways to Look at an *Elderquest***

In *The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels*, we will be examining and then supporting eight different assertions about what we are calling *The Elderquest*:

1. That its search for integrity, connection, and transcendence is the last and perhaps the most important of life's archetypal journeys.
2. That it is a literary and cultural archetype that's been largely ignored for more than two millennia because few of us lived long enough to appreciate its relevance and value.
3. That *The Elderquest* has nonetheless made occasional appearances in some of the world's great literature—in Homer's *Odyssey*, in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *The Tempest*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, for example.
4. That thanks to the longevity revolution, the *Elderquest* is now, for the first time, assuming its rightful place in our anatomy of the human experience, not as a journey that diminishes the importance of the journeys of young adulthood and middle age, but as one that depicts old age as yet another time for questing and discovery rather than the time for retirement and decline.
5. That the prototype for this modern *Elderquest* is Professor Isak Borg's journey in Ingmar Bergman's classic 1953 film, **Wild Strawberries**.
6. That more and more *Elderquests* are appearing, throughout the world, in both literature and film (we'll provide you with lists of both).
7. That our attempt to define the *Elderquest* and its sudden importance requires above all a thorough and insightful analysis of some of its most important examples.
8. That our analysis and evaluation of the *Elderquest* will not be complete until we have asked whether these cinematic and literary journeys mirror, anticipate, inspire, or impact in any significant way our own experience of the new old age.

***Handout Four:***

**Homer and the First *Elderquest*: The Text**

In the underworld, Tiresias prophesies the *Elderquest* that awaits Odysseus after his return to Ithaca:

But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—  
by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—  
go forth once more, you must...  
carry your well-planed oar until you come  
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,  
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all  
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,  
wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—  
unmistakable, clear, so clear you can not miss it:  
When another traveler falls in with you and calls  
that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grains.  
then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth  
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,  
Poseidon—a ram, a bull, and a ramping wild boar—  
then journey home and render noble offerings up  
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,  
to all the gods in order.  
And at last your own death will steal upon you...  
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes  
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age  
with all your people there in blessed peace around you.  
All that I have told you will come true.

Homer, **The Odyssey**, Book XI, 134-156 (Fagles trans.)

## *Handout Five:*

### **Analyzing Film: An Introduction to Cinematics and a Glossary of Its Terms**

Note: While these terms can be found in just about any book on film and its analysis, we are particularly indebted to two, both of which are short, clear, and designed for students and beginners: Piper, Jim, **Get the Picture? The Movie Lover's Guide to Watching Films**. New York: Alworth Press, 2001, and Corrigan, Timothy, **A Short Guide to Writing about Film**. Fifth Edition. New York: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Our primary goal in *The Elderquest in Today's Movies and Novels* is to introduce you to a new kind of narrative or story, one that takes an older man or woman (or both) on what may be the last and most important of life's journeys. We call it a new narrative of aging, even though it appears to have ancient origins, because it is not widely known and has only recently begun to resurface, most notably in the movies. Why this is so and what it imports—for aging and for all of us—are questions we will be addressing elsewhere. But first we need to decide what this story is about and how the various versions we will be studying compare and contrast to one another. For example, can we induce from them the nature and purpose of this last journey?

We're quite confident that we can, but we'll need your help, for defining the *Elderquest* in this way will require close and informed readings of these movies and novels. Let's begin therefore with a brief introduction to film analysis and the vocabulary we will need to conduct it.

#### **Cinematics**

Narrative films like narrative literature rely on plot, character, setting, theme, tone, style, and point of view to tell their stories, and most of us have been interpreting stories in this way since high school. But they also have other storytelling techniques or ways of conveying meaning—shots, cuts, camera angles, and sound—which are peculiar to film and less familiar to most moviegoers. Even if you have no intention of making films of your own, learning something of these elements of film, usually characterized as *cinematics*, can greatly increase your appreciation and understanding of excellent and serious films such as these.

Note: Rather than give you examples of these elements here, we will begin each film presentation with some examples of and questions about the use of cinematics to convey meaning in the film you are about to watch. We will then begin the post-film discussions with a brief consideration of these questions.

#### **I. Shots**

These continually exposed and unedited images of any length are the raw material from which all films are constructed. The average shot these days is six seconds in length. Therefore those shots that are much longer are increasingly unusual and always stand out—even to the least sophisticated moviegoer. Some of these long takes are little more than gimmicks that distract you from the story, but others stop the film, increasing its drama and intensity. The end of **The Trip to Bountiful** features such a long take when it focuses on Ms. Watts's son, Lutie, and allows him to tell his story, without interruption, for the first time. Suddenly, we realize that Ms. Watts has made this trip for him as well as herself.

## ***Frames***

The borders within which the shot is composed. Most *frames* come in five different varieties, depending on the distance of the camera from its subject, and each has its own dramatic function(s):

The extreme long shot (ELS). Typically used at the beginnings and endings of films, they establish setting and provide perspective. They are also common as transitions from one setting to another.

The long shot (LS). Provides enough space for several characters and their movements.

The medium shot (MS). Typically involves two characters.

The close up (CU). The head or head and shoulders of a single character.

The extreme close-up (ECU). Featured in the most dramatic moments—faces, eyeballs, clocks, suicide notes, physical clues in mysteries, etc.

## ***Angles***

These are determined by the height of the camera and its direction when it takes the shot.

**Eye level.** The norm, this angle is the one we get in real life.

**Low angle.** The most recent effective use of this technique can be found in **The March of Penguins**. Almost the entire film is shot at penguin eye level, which is obviously a low level (less than three feet off the ground) for adult humans. After a while, our identification with this point of view seems quite natural. Usually, however, a low angle means that we are looking up at the characters, which makes them larger and more imposing.

**High angle.** Here the reverse is the case; we are looking down on the characters, which diminishes their importance and heightens our own.

**Unusual angle.** Upside down, at a slant, from the floor, etc. All these sometimes crazy angles draw attention to the shot—for dramatic, comic, or scary effect.

## ***Moves***

This is why they're called movies. Either the camera moves, the characters and/or objects in the frame move, or both move at the same time.

**Camera moves.** In *Schulze Gets the Blues*, a 2005 German version of the *Elderquest*, the camera remains stationary throughout the first half of the film—when Schulze is retired, bored, and reduced to doing nothing. Then, once he discovers the blues—zydeco actually—the camera moves to emphasize that he is finally up and moving again, this time with the music.

*Dolly shots*—on a fixed track, forward or backward, to the left or to the right.

*Handheld moves*—used in tight spaces, handheld moves are often unsteady, at times dizzying, but they make you part of the action more than any other kinds of camera moves.

*Crane shots*—moving, steady, high-level shots diminish the size of the subject and have a number of purposes.

*Pans*—moving the camera laterally, surveying the scene, *and tilts, zoom shots, and circular shots* are all less common and therefore more dramatic.

*Actor moves*—self-explanatory and omnipresent but can include eye movement, movement in place, movement to show nervousness, or strength. In **The Trip to Bountiful**, watch Ms. Watts' hands throughout the film—they are constantly moving—reaching out, expressing frustration, pleasure, etc.

*Both moving at the same time*—emphasizes the speed of the action, can be more involving or even disorienting. Most extreme use of this can be found in the German philosophical thriller, **Run Lola Run**.

### ***Optics***

The choice of lens and its focus can also alter the frame and its effect.

*Wide Angle*. This puts everything in the frame into focus—important for establishing the scene because it does not focus on any single part of it.

*Normal*. The most commonly used lens, imitates human sight.

*Telephoto*. Here, only the foreground is in focus, and the rest of the objects in the frame are slightly distorted and fuzzy. This obviously draws attention to a particular part of the frame.

### ***Soft Focus vs. Deep Focus***

How the lens is focused can also alter the meaning and/or emotional content of what is being shot. Soft or not sharp focus conveys nostalgia, sentiment, a warm and fuzzy feel. Sharp or deep focus lays bare everything in a realistic, unblinking way.

### ***Film Stock***

*Black and White, Color, Grainy*. Black and White, though out of favor at the moment, relies heavily on dramatic, usually artificial, lighting, emphasizing darks, lights, shades of gray, and can be very moody depending on its tonal emphases—e.g., film noir. Grainy stock gives a feel of gritty reality or not quite real memories, depending on the lighting, the subject, and the context.

### ***Composition***

This is the arranging of the shot within the frame and is an element taken from and common to both painting and still photography. It is most obvious in films about painters. Sometimes individual frames are set up to resemble or recall specific paintings. This is true of the gas station shot in **The Trip to Bountiful**, which recalls a famous Edward Hopper painting.

## II. *Scenes or Mis en Scene*

Most often referred to by its French term, which means “what is put into the scene (or frame).” This element is also common to stage plays and consists of four different ingredients: lighting, set design, costumes, and props.

## III. *Sounds*

Here, too, there is some overlap with the stage play, but the role of sound in film is much more complex and varied. The best way to become more aware of the role of sound in the creation of a film’s impact and meaning is to close one’s eyes occasionally and concentrate on it to the exclusion of all visual elements.

*Dialogue.* Can continue even after the setting has changed, or sometimes the reverse happens—we hear someone talking before the speaker appears in the frame.

*Narration.* Used in only one of our films, **Wild Strawberries**, narration is usually restricted to films that want to show us a single character’s version of what is happening. Of course, the visuals and the dialogue can often contradict the narrator’s perception.

*Music.* Its presence or absence, plays an important role in all films. **The Trip to Bountiful**, as we shall see, is a film in which music is central to both the film’s meaning and its tone.

*Sound Effects.* In **The Straight Story**, for example, sound effects often dramatize the danger that Alvin Straight faces by taking to the road on his riding mower. Trucks pound, whoosh, and snort as they zoom by; his own tiny engine screams as he careens down hill out of control, etc.

**Sound Mix.** The way in which all of a film’s sounds are combined to create a unified effect is crucial to the film’s meaning and is the responsibility of the sound editor.

## IV. *Cuts*

Cuts or Edits refer to the process in which the shots or takes are selected, cut, and rearranged to make the finished film. Cutting or editing is the joint responsibility of the film’s director and its editor. First, the editor puts together a chronological rough cut of all the film’s unedited takes, then the editor and the director get together to make some choices about what to keep, what to cut, and how to arrange what is left in the most effective way. Final responsibility for the finished film rests with the director, but most of the cutting, a very creative part of film making, is the responsibility of the film’s editor.

Two rules of thumb pertain in the cutting process: 1. It takes many takes to produce a few usable shots. (**In Strangers in Good Company**, a famous Canadian aging film, 200 hours of film were shot to make a two-hour movie.) 2. One take can be cut to create many usable shots. In a long flashback, for example, the face of the person who is looking back can be returned to again and again as the flashback unfolds.

Different kinds of cuts are used for different purposes—the *match cut* maintains continuity and believability by assuring that the positions of things in the frame remain the same each time that image is returned to; the *crosscut* makes it possible for the film to tell two different stories at the same time, by cutting from one to the other as each unfolds. *Cutaways* can be used to register the reactions of other characters to what the central character is saying or doing; *cutins* make it

possible to show things such as clues in a mystery, which the characters in the scene may not be aware of, and point of view or “pov” shots or cuts make it clear that we are seeing what someone else in the film is seeing.

Cutting conveys meaning and shapes the audience’s response in all sorts of key ways. It can expand time, contract time, or present us with the sense that what we are seeing is being lived in real time. Montage, one of the oldest of film terms, describes the way in which the juxtaposition of shot *a* with shot *b* can determine the way in which we respond to shot *c*.

## V. *Film Styles*

There are obviously all kinds of film styles with ultra realism (the attempt to make everything as much like real life as possible) at one end of the spectrum and ultra formalism (the attempt to manipulate and even transform reality into something more metaphoric, symbolic, or formalistic) at the other.

Vittoria de Sica’s 1949 **The Bicycle Thief** is an excellent example of Italian neo-realism or ultra realism, whereas Francis Ford Coppola’s **Apocalypse Now** attempts to show us the ugly, surreal reality of Vietnam by turning to formalism, e.g., the helicopters attacking the village to the sound of Wagner’s *Ride of the Valkyries*.

But the most important thing to bear in mind when comparing and contrasting these two styles is to remember that no film is really realistic in a literal sense. It rearranges and distorts reality to make its points. It’s just that some films seek to disguise these distortions and transformations (so called realistic ones) while others (more formalistic ones) rely more heavily upon them to convey their meanings and therefore draw more attention to them.

Most mainstream and American films, not surprisingly, lie somewhere in the middle, and this middling style is usually referred to as the **Hollywood Style**, which uses the same techniques so often that they become invisible to most audiences who are unaccustomed to any other techniques. That’s why films such as the ones we will be watching come as such a surprise to audiences—they are little, realistic, and artful films that speak to us of real people in real situations, and they do so with often surprisingly sophisticated and often formalistic techniques.



## Supporting Materials

### A. *Odysseus, Tiresias, and The Elderquest*

The first description of an *Elderquest* occurs surprisingly enough in the middle of **The Odyssey**, one of the earliest and most celebrated versions of the hero's quest, that is, the journey of a much younger man. Odysseus hears of it from Tiresias at the gates of the underworld where he has gone for help to complete his journey. His problem, as we all know, is his excessively masculine and brash approach to the opponents he continues to encounter. It worked in **The Iliad** when his sole goal was to defeat the Trojans and win the war. But now that he's headed home, he won't back off and angers Poseidon repeatedly, most notably in his treatment of Polyphemus, the sea god's son. Now Tiresias has told him that this kind of youthful and no longer appropriate hubris will cost him the lives of all his shipmates and all but one of his ships, and he is appropriately contrite. But the insistence that he will have to embark on a new journey after he does reach home and that that journey will require some decidedly un-heroic behavior on his part is clearly a source of irritation to the unreconstructed hero. Here's the prophecy in full, and it remains a prophecy, for it is the only one of the blind seer's predictions that does not come to pass before the epic ends:

But once you have killed those suitors in your halls—  
by stealth or in open fight with slashing bronze—  
go forth once more, you must...  
carry your well-planed oar until you come  
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,  
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all  
to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars,  
wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—  
unmistakable, clear, so clear you can not miss it:  
When another traveler falls in with you and calls  
that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grains.  
then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth  
and sacrifice fine beasts to the lord god of the sea,  
Poseidon—a ram, a bull, and a ramping wild boar—  
then journey home and render noble offerings up  
to the deathless gods who rule the vaulting skies,  
to all the gods in order.  
And at last your own death will steal upon you...  
a gentle, painless death, far from the sea it comes  
to take you down, borne down with the years in ripe old age  
with all your people there in blessed peace around you.  
All that I have told you will come true.<sup>2</sup>

It's easy to see why Odysseus, the epitome of the heroic warrior and adventurer, shows no enthusiasm for setting off on this last journey. He's not being asked to perform one last heroic feat; he's being asked to retire, to let go of all that has won him glory and earned him the immortality he so richly deserves. His oar is more than a symbol of his seamanship; it's his weapon of choice, the one he has used to combat Poseidon and all those enemies human and

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<sup>2</sup>The Odyssey, Robert Fagles translation, Book XI lls. 136-156.

divine who have sought to block his passage home. It and the fame it has brought him have in fact earned him his immortality. Now he is being asked to give that up voluntarily, to renounce all claims to heroism and enter old age, that time of life when he will no longer have any opportunities to transcend death, but must instead sink down into it, peacefully but un-heroically.<sup>3</sup>

Can we (or do we want to) imagine Odysseus in this way—living out his last days humbly and anonymously as a farmer? Obviously not, for our last image of him is that of the hero, quest accomplished, but still in his prime, fresh from slaying the suitors and about to enjoy his reunion with the wife and family. After that, sending him off into the hills to bury his oar would have been an anticlimax.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, Homer doesn't let Odysseus forget these instructions either, for he shares them with Penelope upon his return, grumbling about how little joy such a journey will bring. Sensing his discontent, Penelope reaffirms her faith in the Gods and the possibility of "a happier old age."

"...in her great wisdom, if the gods will really grant a happier old age,  
There's hope that we will escape our trials at last."<sup>5</sup>

Why, then, if he wasn't going to show it, did Homer even mention this unheroic old man's quest in the epic in the first place? Thomas Falkner, in **The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy**,<sup>6</sup> reminds us that other anti-heroic sentiments can also be found in **The Odyssey**—the whole characterization of Laertes, Odysseus' elderly father in this same final book, as well as Achilles' admission, when Odysseus encounters him in the underworld, that the glory purchased by a youthful, heroic death might not be worth it after all.

Some scholars have attributed these "lapses" to Homer's advanced age when he completed his second epic—as though they were an indication of his decline. Falkner attributes them to the passing of the Greek Heroic Age; Odysseus is, after all, a comic hero rather than a tragic one (as Achilles was in **The Iliad**).

But isn't the explanation even simpler than that? Heroic values, the values by which young men live, are no longer relevant in old age. Homer knew it, even though he practically invented the glorification of the hero. So does everyone who has lived long enough. But the young really don't believe it since they don't really believe that they will ever grow old, and even those who have begun to age are eager to deny it. That's where Odysseus is when the book ends, even though the Gods have already told him what he must do.

Why, then, has this ancient insight been so consistently ignored or forgotten? Because for nearly three millennia we have continued to equate age and its quests with anticlimax and decline. Having successfully (or unsuccessfully) negotiated the hazards of youth and midlife, how can we be expected to show any enthusiasm for yet another quest, especially one that seems to require

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<sup>3</sup> That this is the general view of old age and death in Greek epic and poetry is argued most persuasively in Thomas M. Falkner's **The Poetics of Old Age in Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy**. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> It would be comparable to having mainstream fairy tales end not with, "and so they married and lived happily ever after," but with a realistic portrayal of what those later, post-marital years were really like. See: Chinen, Allan B. **In the Ever After: Fairy Tales and the Second Half of Life**. Willmette: Chiron Publications, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Book XXIII, lls, 326-28

<sup>6</sup> Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995.

submission rather than enterprise. This distaste for Tiresias' prophecy and all that it might entail has been so pervasive that nearly all commentators on **The Odyssey** have either downplayed its significance or ignored it altogether. Nor has anyone, until quite recently, tried to explain what this final journey might actually accomplish for the aging hero willing to undertake it.

As far as I can tell, the first and only person to do so is Helen Luke, the Jungian author of **Old Age: Journey into Simplicity**. In fact, she takes Tiresias' prophecy so seriously that she not only interprets it but completes it for us.<sup>7</sup> In the process, she reminds us that the winnowing rake is the tool that farmers use to separate the wheat from the chaff, and that this is a process that mirrors in the psychic realm the acquisition of wisdom and mature judgment, the ability to discern between that which really matters and that which doesn't. According to this interpretation, and we will return to it later, Odysseus isn't simply being asked to retire and renounce his power and prowess, he is being asked to exchange it for that which he has learned along the way, the wisdom to weigh alternatives and discard the less desirable ones.

Remember only what the oar has meant to you through the many years of your life, Odysseus. You have been brought by the seer who is blind to outer shapes but who sees the shape of things within and their meaning in each man's life, to make this last journey precisely in order that you may finally recognize your own oar as a true winnowing fan. Do you not know that your travels, your achievements and failures, the gains and losses to which your winged ship carried you were all slowly forging for you a "winnowing fan"? Now that the harvest is gathered and you stand in the autumn of your life, your oar is no longer a driving force carrying you over the oceans of your inner and outer worlds, but a spirit of discriminating wisdom, separating moment by moment the wheat of life from the chaff, so that you may know in both wheat and chaff their meaning and value in the pattern of the universe. This final journey seemed pointless—indeed merely a kind of "chaff" blowing in the wind, but you chose it nonetheless because at last you trusted the blind seer hidden in your heart, as Penelope has trusted him for so long.<sup>8</sup>

In short, this last journey really is an *Elderquest* because its successful completion requires the mastery of a whole new set of skills (the psychologists would call them developmental tasks), those that are necessary to navigate not midlife but old age: trust, wisdom, and the willingness to let go.

But Luke's interpretation of Tiresias' prophecy is not only Jungian, it is also late twentieth century, written when both she and the rest of us were beginning to explore "the virgin territory" of old age.

An earlier version of Odysseus' final journey, Tennyson's 1842, *Ulysses*, provides us with another earlier take on the differences between his earlier heroic adventures and his *Elderquest*. Tennyson based his poem on a medieval legend made famous by Dante in **The Inferno**, and, like Dante, he either doesn't know or chooses to ignore Tiresias' prophecy, telling us instead that the older Odysseus eventually set sail for the Pillars of Hercules and the unknown sea to the west. But there the similarities end.

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<sup>7</sup>Luke, Helen. **Old Age: Journey into Simplicity**. New York: Parabola Books, 1987. 10-24.

<sup>8</sup> **Old Age**, 18.

Dante tells us that the hero's thirst for glory (his heroic and still youthful values) had overcome his fondness for his son, his reverence for his father, and his love for Penelope (all good Christian virtues and appropriate for the old man he had become), for he had talked his countrymen into setting sail once more. For that evil counsel and the sin of overreaching, he and all his crew were lost at sea, and he was condemned to eternal damnation in the eighth pocket of the eighth circle of Hell, the one reserved for evil counselors. For Dante, old age clearly wasn't a time for questing of any sort.

Not so with Tennyson; his *Ulysses*<sup>9</sup> sees retirement with Penelope as unrelievedly dull and uninspiring, a waste of his talent and energy:

It little profit that an idle king,  
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,  
Matched with an aged wife, I mete and dole  
Unequal laws unto a savage race,  
That hoard and sleep, and know not me.

...How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!

It is time, therefore, to set sail once again ("I cannot rest from travel") even though in his exhortation to his crew he is quite willing to admit that he and they are old and past their prime:

....you and I are old;  
Old age hath yet his honor and his toil;  
Death closes all: but something ere the end,  
Some work of noble note may yet be done,  
Not unbecoming men that strove with Gods.

We are not now that strength which in old days  
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are,--  
One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Even though this sounds very much like a repeat performance—*Odyssey II: The Sequel*, it is still a quest undertaken by an older man who both knows and refuses to accept his limits. The reasons for the trip have also changed. It's no longer about revenge, victory in war, or battling one's way home. This time his purpose seems to be twofold:

To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.  
and  
To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths  
Of all the western stars until I die

Both defiant and realistic, this Ulysses is a hero for those of us who choose to battle aging until our dying breaths, now more interested in knowledge than victory and less sanguine about our

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<sup>9</sup> Tennyson, Alfred Lord, **Selected Poems**. Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Edition, 1992. pp. 25-27.

chances for ultimate success, but defiant nonetheless. You might call this the Dylan Thomas approach to aging: “Rage, Rage against the dying of the light!”

You might also call it a rationale for embarking on an *Elderquest*—at least it keeps you active and fully engaged and delivers you from the inactivity of an unwanted and stultifying retirement. Ron Mannheimer has used this poem for precisely that point in his classes with the retired.<sup>10</sup> A number of the films we are about to discuss also approach the *Elderquest* in this way—most notably **Space Cowboys**, **The Unforgiven**, and **The Last Lieutenant**. Yet all these films also indicate that the problem with this kind of quest is that it is too much like the quests undertaken in one’s youth, young adulthood, and middle age. Rather than adjusting to the changes, looking for the consolations, and acknowledging the challenges of old age, it seeks to pursue and maintain the hard won values and accomplishments of midlife. This may be an admirable goal for some, but for others, especially the less talented and strong, it is bound to lead to frustration and defeat.

Even more importantly, this kind of *Elderquest* overlooks the alternative represented by Tiresias’ prophecy in **The Odyssey** itself. But, as we have indicated above, we’ve been ignoring those instructions for nearly three millennia—precisely because they ask us to turn our backs on so much that has seemed essential to our well being for so long.

Homer may not have known which way he wanted Odysseus to end his days. But both Luke and Tennyson are very clear. Odysseus’ wanderings were not finished when he reached Ithaca and the threshold of old age. Both imagine him embarking on a final *Elderquest*, even though they differ greatly on what this journey was like. In the process, they have provided us with alternate models for the *Elderquest* first suggested by Homer.

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<sup>10</sup> Mannheimer, Ronald. **A Map to The End of Time. Wayfaring with Friends and Philosophers.** New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

## ***B. Oedipus The King and Oedipus at Colonus: The Hero's Quest vs. the Elderquest***

It is Sophocles, however, who has provided us with the most inspiring prototype for today's *Elderquests*. His hero, the Oedipus of **Oedipus at Colonus**, triumphantly completes his journey, moving from blindness, powerlessness, self-hatred, and exile (at the end of **Oedipus The King**) though suffering, anger, and love (in between the plays and throughout most of this one) to acceptance, wisdom, power, and a peaceful, socially useful death. This transformation from despair to integrity, from scapegoat and scourge of Thebes to citizen and blessed guardian spirit of Athens, is, as Thomas Falkner has pointed out, the exact opposite of King Lear's.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, as we all know, Lear's downward spiral is still the dominant paradigm for what it means to move through old age, as it was in Sophocles' time. In the play, it is the chorus of Athenian elders that speaks for this dominant and extremely negative view of old age:

Not to be born is best  
when all is reckoned in, but once a man has seen the light  
the next best thing, by far, is to go back  
back where he came from, quickly as he can.  
For once his youth slips by, light on the wing  
lightheaded...what mortal blows can he escape  
what griefs won't stalk his days?  
Envy and enemies, rage and battles, bloodshed  
and last of all despised old age overtakes him,  
stripped of power, companions, stripped of love—  
the worst this life of pain can offer,  
old age our mate at last.<sup>12</sup>

Nor is it surprising that they should make this observation in between Oedipus' angry disputes with Creon and Polyneices. He has entered their city a blind, broken, old man in rags, weary of wandering and looking for nothing more than a safe place to sit and rest. Then he has been pursued and set upon by the treacherous Creon, himself an old man, and his equally insincere and manipulative son, Polyneices.

But one of the great ironies of this play is that the frail old man is not what he seems, nor is he the same man he was in his youth and young adulthood when he was forced to confront the horrors that the Gods had in store for him in **Oedipus The King**. In that play, as every school child knows, Oedipus lives to regret his youthful brashness and lack of self knowledge, but puts out his eyes in a desperate act of self loathing mixed with an extraordinarily noble and heroic willingness to assume full responsibility for his heinous if unintentional acts. Then, rather than remain a scourge for his beloved Thebes, he exiles himself.

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<sup>11</sup> Falkner, Thomas M. **The Poetics of Old Age in Greek Epic, Lyric, and Tragedy**. Norman, OK: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1995. I owe this insight and much of the analysis that follows to this brilliant, ground breaking book, one of the first to undertake a systematic study of the presentation of old age in literature. We very much need other, comparable studies for the literature of other periods.

<sup>12</sup> Some mistakenly assume that the chorus speaks for Sophocles, but Falkner (243-5) convincingly establishes that this is precisely the dominant paradigm that Sophocles and his protagonist are seeking to overturn, for, as C.M. Bowra has put it, the chorus in this play represents "ordinary uninstructed opinion."

It is without question the most cathartic moment in western literature, or, to put it more accurately, the western literature that concerns itself with the exploits and obligations of heroes in their prime, those who are embarked not on *Elderquests* but on the younger and far more familiar heroic quests. And, like most of these questers, this younger Oedipus has been in search of himself, even when he doesn't know it. When he succeeds, much to his horror, his response is in keeping with the proud, powerful, and courageous hero he has always felt himself to be—he accepts full responsibility and punishes himself.

End of story. Or is it? Given the enormous popularity of **Oedipus the King** and the relative obscurity of **Oedipus at Colonus**, most of us continue to think that it is. The second play, after all, is about Oedipus in old age, and who wants to read about that kind of anticlimax and falling off?

But Sophocles obviously came to think differently, for, unlike nearly all of his contemporaries, he lived to a very old age. To sum up the new insights and new perspectives that these added years had brought, he turned again to Oedipus when he was almost 90 and wrote **Oedipus at Colonus**. To have written such a masterpiece at that age would be remarkable even today. In ancient Greece, when the life expectancy was less than forty, it was miraculous. And yet Sophocles' own son, according to Xenophon, took him to court to prove him mentally incompetent so that he might gain control of his estate. Fortunately, Sophocles produced the manuscript of **Oedipus at Colonus** for the court's perusal and was promptly acquitted.

For this and other reasons, most consider the play autobiographical. Falkner even suggests that the unjust treatment of Oedipus by his son Polynieces parallels Sophocles' treatment by his own son. Nor does the comparison end there, for in both instances the old men prevail.

That the Oedipus who enters the stage in this play is far different from the one who left the stage at the end of **Oedipus the King** is immediately obvious. His years of poverty, exile, and suffering as well as his now advanced age (his *Elderquest*) have worn him down physically, and it is this appearance of weariness and desperation that the chorus of elders (the keepers of the dominant paradigm of aging as decline) seize upon and continue to emphasize.

It is also clear that this is the first impression that Sophocles, always the supreme ironist, wants him to make on the audience. That's why he has Oedipus, aged, broken down, and in rags, sit rather than stand at center stage throughout almost the whole play. Here he is—a sad specimen of what you think old men are.

But just as quickly we are given a different picture of how Oedipus has changed, this time in his own opening speech.

...it's little I ask  
and get still less, but quite enough for me.  
Acceptance—that's what the great lesson suffering teaches,  
suffering and the long years, my close companions,  
yes, and nobility too, my royal birthright

Acceptance, that's what suffering, aging, the love of his daughters, and his royal birthright have taught him, not the passivity of the powerless old that the chorus so despises, but the kind of spiritual acceptance that comes only when one is near death and ready to understand one's fate from the Gods' perspective. This is also the kind of acceptance that was beyond his reach when he put out his eyes and exiled himself at the end of **Oedipus the King**. Then he was forced to accept the oracles' truth, and he chose quite heroically to accept responsibility for the murder of his father and his marriage to his mother, but he could not accept himself or the nature of the role the Gods had selected for him. And because he so despised himself, he did not blame his fellow Thebans for failing to accept him either.

Now, in the concluding stages of his *Elderquest*, he has come to accept and understand the love of his daughters. It has, in fact, helped him to forgive himself. He has also wrenched from his suffering and the accumulated experience of all these intervening years, the wisdom to distinguish between deeds done intentionally and those done unknowingly ("...no more fighting with necessity" (l. 210). He therefore rejects, with the certainty of a hard won self knowledge, all accusations that he is guilty. He is also beginning to believe that his whole awful story may end positively after all. "Now Goddesses, just as Apollo's voice foretold, grant my life at last some final passage, some great consummation at the end (lls. 124-127).

In short, he is no longer so hard on himself, for in his suffering and his long years of exile and disgrace, he has come to know himself in ways that he never had as a younger man, and this knowledge has taught him that he is indeed noble—that there is an integrity to his life. This is why he is so hard on Creon who has also become an old man but without the honesty and self knowledge, the wisdom, the forgiveness, and the integrity that his *Elderquest* has taught Oedipus. As a consequence, Oedipus is more thankful than ever for the love of those such as Antigone, Ismene, and Theseus, who love and accept him for who he is, and more willing to judge those whose lack of humanity and self-knowledge prevent them from doing so.

Thomas Falkner cites these lessons as evidence that Oedipus' transformation in this play represents a new, alternative paradigm for successfully navigating old age, not only In Sophocles' day but in the present as well. He even compares what Oedipus has learned to what Erikson and his disciples consider crucial steps in the quest for integrity in old age.

Oedipus' repeated arguments for his innocence show how the aged hero has achieved, at painful cost, a sense of the essential integrity and inevitability of his own life.

**Oedipus at Colonus** supplants for a paradigm of helpless dependency one that acknowledges the passivity of old age but reserves for it a full measure of dignity and a relationship between the elderly and their community that is meaningful and mutual. The paradigm embodied in Oedipus we may call heroic, though not in the sense that it is restricted to the heroes of tragedy or is meant only to point up the distance between the heroic temper and the stuff of which normal mortals are made. The principles that guide the hero in his old age are not specific to the hero alone but are available to all. There is a real sense in which the passage through old age is a crisis that all must face and to some extent resolve. In a thoughtful essay on "The Virtues and Vices of The Elderly," which



draws heavily on Eriksonian psychology, William May identifies the virtues, neither automatic with old age nor exclusive to the elderly, that provide the strength that is required to deal with the adversity of age and to flourish in the midst of them (sic). May's list reads like a description of Oedipus and the resources on which he draws in the play: *courage*, which is not simple fearlessness but the ability to keep one's fears under control for one's own good; *patience*, which is not to be confused with passivity but is rather "purposive waiting ...taking control of one's spirit precisely when all else goes out of control"; *wisdom*, which in respect to memory "characterizes the person who remains open to his or her past, without retouching, falsifying, or glorifying it"; and *integrity*, which is nothing less than the moral structure of the whole person... (257-58)

Oedipus' successful journey through old age, in spite of the unspeakable fate that the Gods had bestowed upon him in midlife, is not only western literature's first successfully completed *Elderquest*; it continues to provide us with inspirational guidelines on what such a trip can actually accomplish—for the individuals who dare to embark, and for the societies such as our own that continue to doubt the potential, the relevance, and the courage of the old.

It's a prototype we will return to, for the longevity revolution and the profusion of *Elderquests* that it has spawned make it abundantly clear that the *Elderquest* is an archetype whose time has finally come.

### C. *The Elderquest* and the Road Movie

*The Elderquest* works perfectly as a parody of that favorite American film genre, the road movie—altering and deepening its meaning in the process.

The evocative power of *Elderquest* films (and the fact that there are so many of them) can be directly attributed to the ways in which they recall and then work changes on that old Hollywood standby, the road movie. In **About Schmidt** for example, Director Alexander Payne dramatizes Schmidt's cluelessness after 65 by having him hit the road on an hilarious but totally failed *Elderquest*, even though the same character in Louis Begley's novel never takes to the road at all.

The road movie, as most film goers know, has traditionally chronicled the bittersweet and naïve questings of the young, escaping whatever restricts them and hopping into cars (or anything else that's fast and romantic), hitting the road (preferably west), and starting over as they search for the land of heart's desire that's just over the next hill. American in origin, it traces its roots to the myth of the frontier, Huck Finn, and the desire to leave civilization (and the complications of one's own life) and light out for "the territory ahead." Since the closing of the frontier, the land of heart's desire has become the road itself, and then, with the advent of the automobile, the speed with which one travels that road.

On the other hand, as most Americans and nearly all film goers love to forget, relying on the road for deliverance and redemption is a flawed vision from the start. Like the green light at the end of Gatsby's dock, it constantly recedes before us. Huck and Jim may be free on the raft, but they're drifting south to the land of slavery and Jim's inevitable recapture—the unhappy ending that Twain refused to face, preferring instead to descend into farce with Tom Sawyer's silly and melodramatic rescue.

But the counterculture and the war in Vietnam spawned a new kind of road movie, one which offers an "overt, politicized image of subversion."<sup>13</sup> Rebels, either outlaws (**Bonnie and Clyde**) or questers (**Easy Rider**), turned their backs on the establishment and launched increasingly desperate quests for freedom and a new sense of identity. But, as these two films so graphically demonstrate, their trips inevitably end badly—in disillusion, despair, and a hail of bullets. In **Easy Rider**, the prototype that is most relevant to the *Elderquest*, Peter Fonda's Captain America and his youthful buddies set out to find America and its (their) lost innocence, but by film's end they have not only failed to redeem America (and themselves), they have been forced to face—and pay for—their own involvement in its corruption.

It's this insistence—that the yellow brick road leads not to Oz but to disillusionment and despair—that has turned the modern road movie into the story of youthful rebellion and disillusion, from **Detour**, with its roadhouses full of evil and betrayal, to **Lost Highways**, a David Lynch film one commentator has called "the road movie from hell." The director of **Easy Rider** has even said that he made the film in an attempt to kill off the road movie. He did kill off the last remnants of its youthful optimism and naiveté, but the road movie continues to thrive. Here's how David Laderman sums up the genre's motives as well as its outcomes:

"A utopian vision of social reform drives the road movie beyond society's limits; but the inability to realize

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<sup>13</sup> Laderman, David, **Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie**. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003, p. 35.

such a vision often turns the journey in an aimless, forlorn, and somewhat bitter direction (Laderman, 37).

Meanwhile, to deepen and extend the genre's contemporary relevance, a few road movies have shown us that its rebelliousness and descent into "exaggerated cynicism, irony, and nihilism," need not be restricted to young white males. Women (**Thelma and Louise**), homosexuals (**My Own Private Idaho**), even drag queens (**Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert**) have taken to the road.

There is, in short, real tension in today's road movies between the desire to escape and the deep down sense that it will all end badly, that the only satisfaction in store for these youthful questers is the speed and exhilaration of the initial escape. It's all downhill after that.

Imagine then the confusion and cultural dissonance that is created when older characters start hitting the road, and, even more amazingly, seem less vulnerable to disillusion, cynicism, and defeat than their younger counterparts. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that David Lynch's **The Straight Story**, a prototypical *Elderquest*/road movie, has been called "perverse," "almost an anti-road movie."

After all, road movies are supposed to be about the young not the old; their heroes may not know where they're headed, but at least they're moving quickly, staying in the fast lane, and traveling in style. These old geezers are barely moving at all, riding in buses, renting old cars, staying in the slow lane, breaking down, even walking. In **The Straight Story**, the hero actually straddles a lawn mower and rides with one wheel on the shoulder—at three miles an hour.

Besides, as we all know, the road can be a very hazardous place, even for the young. What are these old folks trying to prove? Like their friends and relatives in all these films, we're not only puzzled by their behavior, we fear for their lives. Old folks are meant to accept their fates and stay at home. After all, they're the establishment from which the youthful rebels of the road movie are trying to escape.

Are they pretending that they're still young? If so, their actions are both misguided and funny, and the *Elderquest* is little more than a parody of the road movie. This, in fact, is the case in the silly but brilliantly titled **Over The Hill**, an Australian comedy starring Olympia Dukakis as a wimpy 60-year-old widow who buys a "souped-up" hot rod and takes off on a series of outrageous, totally unbelievable adventures in which she is first lampooned for acting young and then applauded for succeeding.

But parody is a two-edged sword, and the rest of these *Elderquest*/road movies may begin by poking fun at the unseemliness of their older characters' decisions to hit the road, but eventually they poke even more fun at youthful shallowness and move beyond the disillusion and despair that we have come to associate with the genre whose conventions these oldsters constantly defy.

In the process, these films present moviegoers, most of whom are still young, with the truly radical notion that the old not only have better survival skills; they also have a better chance of completing their quests and finding what they have been looking for. This is true of all *Elderquest* films, but it is especially surprising and memorable in those that parody and eventually reinvent the road movie—**Harry and Tonto**, **The Trip to Bountiful**, **The Children of Nature**, **The Straight Story**, and **Central Station**. There are even films that parody the *Elderquest*/road movie—Alexander Payne's **About Schmidt** and Woody Allen's **Deconstructing Harry**, which is also a parody of **Wild Strawberries**.

## Presentation One: An Introduction to the Elderquest

### A Suggested Outline

If you are interested in the origins of the *Elderquest*, an explanation for its current re-emergence as an alternative and more appropriate narrative for the new old age, its differences from the mid-life or so called hero's quest, and its debt to the road movie, please consult Part One of the **Study Guide**, *The Program and its Rationale*. It contains, among other things, essays on the ancient Greek origins of the *elderquest* in Homer's **The Odyssey** and the **Oedipus at Colonus** of Sophocles.

Here we will confine ourselves to defining its essential components and illustrating how they function by screening and analyzing several clips from *Elderquest* movies, some from the class and some not, for we have already identified more than 20 *elderquest* movies and 19 *elderquest* novels. To assist us in this analysis, we will turn to Handout Two, *Defining the Elderquest* and Handout Six, *Plotting the Elderquest using Wild Strawberries as a Prototype*. The first is a brief synopsis of the story that all these films and novels seem to be telling, and the second breaks down this story or quest into those components which others have found present in all quests—the hero, the call, the search, the journey, the guide, the struggle, the breakthrough, and the return. Here are some of the clips we have found most appropriate (and engaging):

#### 1. The elder hero or heroine:

The opening sequence of **The Winter Guest**—Phyllida Law, the 70 something mother in the story, is moving through the snow and cold to get to her daughter's house. End with her stumble at the rail and its repercussions. The opening sequence of **Strangers in Good Company** as the seven stranded women first move through the fog, and then after their bus breaks down, hoof it up hill to the abandoned farm house.

#### 2. The call:

Alvin Straight in **The Straight Story** watching the rain and lightening with this daughter and then listening to the phone conversation between her and his long estranged brother, Lyle, who has just had a stroke. His almost Lear-like response, the lightening, the determination. **The Talent Given Us**—the scene in the van when the mother first announces her plan to hijack them all to California to see her son and bring the family back together.

#### 3. The search—trying to figure out what the call is all about

Alvin explaining his reasons for going to his daughter in **The Straight Story**  
Professor Borg explaining why he has decided to drive instead of fly to Lund in **Wild Strawberries**.

#### 4. The journey:

Here clips from almost any of the films will work: Borg et al, moving down the coastal highway in their antique car in **Wild Strawberries**; Ms Watts, looking delightedly out the window of the Greyhound as she finally begins her **Trip to Bountiful**, Alvin on his riding mower—placidly through the cornfields, sitting out the rain, fighting traffic, losing control on the way down hill, etc. in **The Straight Story**. Schmidt stopping his camper at the crossroads in **About Schmidt**; Dona Dora and Josue running for their lives as they escape the adoption racketeers and begin their quest in **Central Station**.

#### 5. The guide:

Marianne confronting, then sharing, and helping Isak in **Wild Strawberries**, the original Sara performing the same role for Isak as she shows him his parents near the end of the film. The Rebecca de Mornay character is a guide for Ms Watts as she helps her to escape from her children in the bus station and then accompanys her on her quest in **The Trip to Bountiful**. Mister Bucktrout is Lady Slane's guide in **All Passion Spent** ( see especially scene 20 on the DVD)

#### 6. The Struggle:

Alvin's losing control on the hill and being rescued by the family at the foot of the hill in **The Straight Story**, the beginning of the pilgrimage scene in **Central Station** when Dora curses Josue; he flees, and she runs after him; just about any scene in Schmidt's struggle to make sense of his trip in **About Schmidt**—the one on the roof of his camper where he claims to have a vision of his dead wife amongst the Hummels, and then drives off in the morning as they slide off the roof is a particularly funny and sad one.

#### 7. The Breakthrough

In *elderquests*, these aren't always sudden and dramatic—for example, Isak viewing his parents at the end and then falling asleep smiling in **Wild Strawberries**, but occasionally they are—continuation of the struggle scene in **Central Station**, as Dora collapses in the house of miracles, is found, and then succored by Josue, or Ms. Watts talking to son Lutie about the real sources of her strength at the end of **The Trip to Bountiful**.

#### 8. The Return

Isak at his desk writing down his quest to make sense of it in the opening scene in **Wild Strawberries**; Dora fleeing before dawn and boarding the bus back to the city in **Central Station**. Ms. Watts saying good bye to Bountiful and then getting into the car to the tune of *Coming Home* in **The Trip to Bountiful**.

## Part Two:

### Presentation Two: *Wild Strawberries*

#### *Introduction:*

**Note:** If you have access to the 2002 Criterion Collection DVD of **Wild Strawberries**, you will find Peter Cowie's 2001 commentary most enlightening. By selecting *Commentary*, you can watch the film accompanied by Cowie's comments instead of Bergman's sound track.

This is a crucial session, and both students and facilitators should be thoroughly familiar with the supporting material, ***Wild Strawberries as a Prototype for the Modern Elderquest***. But students should not be forced to read it before the screening, if they prefer to do so, that is fine, too. Instead, facilitators should begin by reminding everyone that we will be using Bergman's film as a prototype, and that they should have the handout, **Plotting the Elderquest** handy for the discussion.

The danger of this chart is that it could turn into too mechanical an approach to the understanding of these various quests—just fill in the blanks. On the other hand, all should be able to recognize these essential components in everything they see and read, and be struck by the various ways in which they are used. Here, it should serve as an excellent way to structure the discussion of **Wild Strawberries**. Then, after the discussion is over, students should be told to turn to the supporting material to deepen and broaden their understanding and appreciation.

Whether you ask students to fill out or at least refer to this chart when thinking about and discussing our other *Elderquests* is up to you and the students. But we do want everyone to chart their own *Elderquests* at the end of the program—the ones they are already on, ones they have already completed, or ones they can imagine embarking upon.

**Wild Strawberries** is also an excellent film to use when introducing cinematics and film analysis. One might, for example, reshoot one of the flashbacks in which Isak interacts with the people from his past as the old man he has become, pointing out that Bergman has created visual equivalents for the life review assumption that the past is the raw material which we continue to rework until we have extracted from it what is most useful to us in the present (see the supporting material)

Students should also be encouraged to consult the relevant section of Part Two of the Study Guide, preferably in advance, and then again after the screening.

## *Supporting Materials*

### **A. *Wild Strawberries* as a Prototype for the Modern Elderquest**

Because it is in large measure a response to the longevity revolution, The Cinema of Age is a relatively recent development. Of the 190 films I have identified (as of Mar 2006), only ten were made before 1970, and of these only one is an *Elderquest*—Ingmar Bergman’s **Wild Strawberries** (1957).<sup>14</sup>

One of the masterpieces of world cinema, Ingmar Bergman’s 1957 **Wild Strawberries**, is a favorite of gerontologists and developmental psychologists as well as film buffs and film historians. The subject of Erik Erikson’s now famous analyses in 1978 and 1986.<sup>15</sup> It is the first film to be used as a case study by a psychologist seeking to define and illustrate his theories about old age.

Writing more than 20 years after the film was released, Erikson is struck by the parallels between 76-year-old Professor Borg’s story and his own writings on the life cycle and its eight stages of psychological development. For him, Isak’s one-day journey into the past is a brilliant and

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<sup>14</sup> The other nine are worth noting. The first, F.W. Murnau’s silent German classic, **The Last Laugh** (1924), is about the disrespect shown a retired doorman (and his ultimate but unconvincing revenge). Three others pick up on this same theme of disrespect for our elders after WWII: Paddy Chayefsky’s, **As Young as You Feel** (1951), Vittorio DeSica’s **Umberto D.** (1952), and Yasujiro Ozu’s **Tokyo Story** (1953). Billy Wilder’s **Sunset Boulevard** (1950) picks up on this theme adding to it the madness and despair which such neglect can elicit. Two are about older men and younger women: **Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid** (1948) and **Sabrina** (1954), and Sam Peckinpah’s **Ride The High Country** is about aging cowboys (1962). But the most interesting of these films is Akira Kurosawa’s **Ikiru** (1952). Akira Kurosawa’s classic does parallel **Wild Strawberries** in many ways, but the differences between them are even more significant for they reveal that the Bergman is in fact a prototype for all the cinematic *Elderquests* to follow, whereas **Ikiru** isn’t really about aging at all. Both feature retirees who are about to be honored but are in no mood to celebrate their lives. Isak Borg, who is 76, seems content, if lonely, but the dream of his own death that opens the film reveals his not quite conscious despair. He then responds by turning his trip to the honors ceremony into a harrowing but eventually redemptive journey into his past—that is, an *Elderquest*.

Kanji Watanabe is younger (probably in his mid-fifties), but his story begins not with intimations of his mortality but a death sentence—he has inoperable cancer and no more than six months to live. He then embarks on a quest which, like Isak’s, eventually proves to be redemptive. But unlike Isak, Watanabe hasn’t lost his way; he has simply and tragically never lived at all. His journey is more than a search for meaning and integrity; it’s a desperate hunt for life itself (*Ikiru* is Japanese for “to live”). Nor does it have much to do with reviewing and reappraising his past—he hasn’t really had one. In other words, his quest, the crisis that prompts it, and the life affirming decisions that give him one last chance to live have nothing to do with age or his stage in life. Far from learning how to age or to accept his own impending death, Watanabe is learning what it means to live, and that’s a more universal, non age-related search than the ones that characterize the *Elderquest*.

<sup>15</sup> “Wild Strawberries” in **Adulthood**, Erik H. Erikson (ed.), New York: W.W. Norton, 1978. Erikson, Erik. Joan Erikson, and Helen Kivnick. **Vital Involvement in Old Age**, New York: W.W. Norton, 1986. Incidentally, it was Joan Erikson who first suggested that the struggle associated with this, life’s final stage, should begin with the negative rather than the positive pole—to emphasize the difficulty of attaining integrity, that it requires constant even heroic effort.

psychologically convincing dramatization of old age's chief developmental task—the often heroic effort to combat *despair* by replacing it with an acceptance of all of one's experience and, most importantly, its *integrity*.

As Erikson also points out, to understand and appreciate the whole of one's life in this way is possible only if one revisits and reevaluates one's responses to the developmental tasks characteristic of life's earlier stages—from infancy to middle age. According to Erikson, Bergman has done this as well, for he finds in Isak's conversations, symbolic encounters, and waking dreams a powerful recreation (and reinterpretation) of all eight stages of his psychological development.

As a psychologist, Erikson is impressed with Bergman's psychological insight, not because it prefigures his own, but because he is convinced that both have significant contributions to make to our understanding of adult development, especially in old age. As a teacher, he is just as impressed with the power of Bergman's art. That's why he turned to **Wild Strawberries** again and again as the most effective way to present his own ideas to his readers and pupils.

...artistic works of greatness have a way of presenting in a convincing form some total truths about life, which rarely characterize other reports and abstracts of a human life, making it truly a life history—within the generational process...

To summarize, we believe that we can best begin to demonstrate more pictorially some of the dynamics of the interwoven stages of human life, as they culminate in old age, by outlining the scenes and themes that reveal, in Bergman's drama, an old man's search for his life's transcendent meaning; and by claiming that all old people are involved in some such search, whether they—or we—know it or not.<sup>16</sup>

Erikson was right about Bergman. He is a great artist, and he does show extraordinary insight into the experience of old age in our time. That's why **Wild Strawberries** is both the first of film's *Elderquests* and arguably its best, for it establishes, both thematically and cinematically, a prototype for the new subgenre. This does not mean that all subsequent *Elderquests* (in literature as well as film) have been directly or even indirectly influenced by it. Nor does it mean that Bergman's film is the definitive *Elderquest* (although cinematically it is still hard to beat), for others have varied, parodied, and extended the form, its conventions and themes, in increasingly inventive ways. It does mean, however, that Bergman was one of the first observers of the new old age, artist or non-artist, to see it as a time for life's final transformative journey—the search for meaning, value, and integrity. Since then, more and more psychologists, film makers, and old people of every description have begun to share this same vision. And, as Erikson reminds us, there is nothing like great art to convince the rest of us that we too are involved in *Elderquests* of our own. Let's turn then to a close analysis of this first modern *Elderquest*—its themes and how they are presented.

Thematically, **Wild Strawberries** is clearly a quest, one that echoes the hero's quest as it is defined in Joseph Campbell's monomyth. There's a call to action, the offer of aid (usually in the form of a guide), the journey, the struggle, the breakthrough, and the return.<sup>17</sup> But Bergman's

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<sup>16</sup> **Vital Involvement in Old Age**, 240.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, Joseph. **Hero with a Thousand Faces**. New York: Meridian Books, 1956. Passim.



hero is 76, much older than the traditional hero, and that changes almost everything about his quest—its motive, its challenges, and its outcome.

The first and most obvious signs that Isak is embarked on an *Elderquest* are his *pace*—slowly with lots of detours and interruptions, and his *choice of vehicles*—a Packard touring car, stately but more than 20 years old. Given his age, neither is hardly surprising. At 76, Isak is no longer capable of speed or interested in it psychologically. He has, after all, cancelled his flight plans and taken to the road because he wants to slow down and take stock, unlike his younger counterparts in the road movies to which **Wild Strawberries** is so clearly indebted. They move through the landscape as quickly as possible in speedy up-to-date vehicles such as choppers (**Easy Rider**), Trans-ams (the vehicles of choice in most Bert Reynolds films), or convertibles (**Thelma and Louise**).

Subsequent elder heroes have followed suit, making this contrast even more obvious and illuminating. Alvin Straight (**The Straight Story**) moves so slowly not only because he walks with canes, but because he is traveling in a riding mower at three miles per hour. Others travel in equally slow and unglamorous ways—in buses, second hand cars, even on foot. (**The Trip to Bountiful**, **Strangers in Good Company**, **Central Station**, and **Harry and Tonto**) As we shall see, this reduced pace and less reliable choice of vehicles can be both an advantage and a disadvantage.

### The Elder Hero

Professor Isak Borg, a 76-year-old, apparently happy and successful physician, is about to be honored for a lifetime of service to science. On the night before he is to leave Stockholm for the ceremony, he has a terrifying nightmare in which he confronts himself as a faceless corpse. Shocked by the awful disparity between this public recognition and self condemnation, he cancels his flight plans and embarks on not one journey but two—an automobile trip to the University of Lund where he is to be feted for his public accomplishments, and an inner journey (or *Elderquest*) in which he is haunted by his private failings, determined to admit them, committed to an exploration of his past in an attempt to understand them, and then engaged in a determined struggle to return to life and rise above them.

What then makes him an elder hero?

#### *His Age.*

In contemporary literature and film, three quarters of all elder heroes are in their 70s. Apparently, the 70s are still the decade when we begin to think of ourselves as unequivocally old. (The others are as young as 50 and as old as 90)<sup>18</sup>

*His sudden awareness, no matter how dim or unconscious, that something is wrong (not with the world) but himself.*

In Erikson's terms, this is the sudden and disturbing realization that one is losing the battle between *despair* and *integrity*.

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<sup>18</sup> Gender, however, is less important. More than one third of today's elder heroes are women.

*His courage—to embark on an Elderquest—no matter how desperate or dangerous, to make the most of the journey, and to use its hard-won truths to transform his attitudes and behaviors in the present.*

Isak's courage builds slowly and then never falters, but other elder heroes either stumble from the start or falter along the way (for example, **King Lear** and **About Schmidt**).

## The Call

Professor Borg's dream, a favorite with psychotherapists as well cineastes, is his call to action. A terrifying warning of what's to come if he does not change his ways (cf. Scrooge's encounters with the spirits in Dickens' **A Christmas Carol** or, more recently, Woody Allen's encounters with Billy Crystal as Satan in his hilarious send-up of **Wild Strawberries**, 1997's **Deconstructing Harry**); it is also a compelling dramatization of the kind of symbolic, heart-stopping dream that shatters our defenses and forces us to confront our deepest fears. With Professor Borg, it's the terrifying conviction that even though others are about to honor him; he is beginning to believe that he is already dead, at least emotionally.

But a call is only a call if it forces the hero to set forth to correct the problems of which it speaks, and that is precisely Professor Borg's response. When he wakes up, he tells us, "I knew immediately what I should do."<sup>19</sup> But the certainty with which he cancels his flight plans and decides instead to drive to Lund in his old touring car should not be mistaken for foreknowledge of everything that eventually happens. To the contrary, he simply knows that he must do something to fight the fear and uncertainty that the dream has caused him, and a long drive through the landscape of his youth should give him ample time and opportunity to remember and reflect. Beyond that he goes with the flow and is repeatedly surprised by what he hears, sees, and imagines.

That Professor Borg only partly understands this urgent call to action is hardly surprising; it comes, after all, from his unconscious. But these same feelings of urgency and uncertainty are to be found in other elder heroes who are somehow called to set forth. In **The Trip to Bountiful**, for example, seventy something Ms. Watts (Geraldine Page) keeps repeating to all who ask that she "just had to" get back to Bountiful, as though someone else, maybe even God, was telling her what she had to do. Not only can she not tell us why; she is also quite uncertain about how, putting her trust in the Lord.

In **The Straight Story**, the call is just that, a telephone call informing Alvin Straight that his estranged brother is close to death 300 miles away in Wisconsin. Other *Elderquests* begin either with an unconscious urging or a mysterious summons; they just happen, thrusting the elder hero into an adventure he or she never consciously sought. In **Strangers in Good Company**, for example, a bus breaks down, turning a leisurely tour into a harrowing adventure and an opportunity for several elder heroes to swap stories and learn more about themselves and their capabilities. In **Central Station**, a chance encounter with a desperate orphan launches elder hero Dona Dora on perhaps the most harrowing and eventually transformative *Elderquest* of all.

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<sup>19</sup> Bergman, **Four Screenplays**, 173.

## The Guide

Even though Professor Borg is prepared to take off on his quest alone, a guide, his daughter-in-law Marianne, almost instantly appears. She asks to come along because she wants to return to her husband, his son Evald, in Lund. She's left him temporarily because she is pregnant, and he has told her that he does not want the child. Now, having decided to keep the baby, she's about to confront Evald with her decision.

Like Isak, therefore, Marianne is in crisis and not sure how things will turn out; but she's already chosen life over death, a decision that Borg is hoping to emulate if he can only figure out how to do so. She is, in short, the perfect guide for Isak in his quest to return to life and love. Part inquisitor who lays bare his faults and forces him to confront them, she begins by seeing Isak as the cold, totally life denying man whom she is ready to blame for making his son the same way. But later she becomes his confidante, accompanying him on many of his excursions into the past and sharing her own misgivings about Evald.

But above all, Marianne is the voice of life and love. Not only does she help Isak to renew his faith in his own capacity to open up to experience, but, by journey's end, she has come to love Isak and recognize in him the loving generative man he once was and is struggling once again to become. She succeeds so well that by film's end Isak helps her to regain faith in Evald as well.

But there are other guides too: the young hitchhiker, Sara, and her double, the young cousin Sara who rejected Evald in his youth. As the young hitchhiker, Sara flirts shamelessly with Isak, and he finds himself flirting, quite charmingly, back. As the young cousin who had caused him such pain and uncertainty in his youth, Sara guides him through these earlier experiences, telling him quite patiently and honestly, that he was simply an "old stick," too stiff and serious to love her and be loved in return.

And finally there is Alman, the guide as inquisitor and judge. He has to be the cruelest, most judgmental guide, for his role is to confront Isak with his most egregious "crime," his failure to love his wife and the suffering it has caused her. Coming near the end of the quest, these scenes between Isak and his unforgiving guide represent the penultimate stage in Isak's transformation—the recognition and rejection of his most damaging shortcomings.

All that remains is a chance to redeem himself by overcoming them and demonstrating his capacity for love in the present. He begins by reaching out to Evald to restore him to life and love as well, but he would not be able to do it without the assistance, once again, of his first guide, his daughter-in-law Marianne. The film's most obvious example of someone who has chosen life and love over death and withdrawal, Marianne is also the first person whom Isak has learned to love.

In all the *Elderquests* to follow, the guide's role remains the same. It is his or her obligation to help the hero to open up and respond more honestly to experience, both present and past. That, of course, is the fool's role in **King Lear**, although unfortunately he appears too late. It is also the young boy Josue's role in **Central Station**, and, although we doubt it at first, he does arrive on time. In fact, this film's elder hero, Dona Dora, like Professor Borg, ends up guiding him in return. In **About Schmidt**, on the other hand, there are no guides, because Schmidt is too closed down and self-absorbed to listen to anyone anyway.

But what are we to make of the presence of not one guide but several, each playing an important role in the success of Isak's quest? It appears to be another of those ways in which the *Elderquest* differs from the quests undertaken in young adulthood or middle age. After all, the goal of such a quest is a greater knowledge of one's self and a new openness to life and love, and one cannot accomplish either of these goals without the willingness to trust and to open up to others. In short, the successful elderquester is someone who is open enough to benefit from the guidance offered by just about anyone he or she encounters along the way. And this is precisely what most of these contemporary elder heroes do.

In **Harry and Tonto** and **The Trip to Bountiful**, for example, Harry and Ms. Watts are so open to others and themselves that they can turn to anyone for guidance and often do. In fact, the presence and availability of all these guides suggest that in Elderquests openness and trust are even more important than purpose or a clearly defined goal.

### **The Journey**

Here, as in all these *Elderquests*, there is not one journey but two—Isak's actual car trip to Lund and his imagined journey into the past. The former, unlike the journeys in the road movies which it both imitates and extends, has a specific purpose and destination—to accept an honorary degree for a lifetime of distinguished service to medicine. But thanks to his dream, Isak doesn't feel good about himself so he takes to the road rather than flying because it will defer his arrival until he has had the chance to reexamine his life and come to his own conclusions.

These detours, reveries, and encounters resemble those to be found in the road movie where the hero is less interested in the destination than the journey, and is therefore open to suggestion, willing to alter or reverse his direction, and respond quite openly to those he encounters along the way. But there is one important difference; all of Isak's detours and interruptions take him backward into the past, rather than forward and away from it, and this is what makes his entire journey an *Elderquest*. Its goal is not the fleeting sense of freedom that comes from the absence of restraint and the repudiation of the past—see **Easy Rider**, **Thelma and Louise**, and countless other road movies that celebrate the brief but seductive pleasures of escape. It celebrates instead the freedom that comes from the discovery that re-imagining one's past with an open and honest heart (and accepting full responsibility for it) can actually enhance one's sense of value and integrity.

The ultimate purpose of all these retrospective side trips, therefore, is to convince Isak (and the audience) that the past is neither over nor unalterable, that one can use one's new reflections upon it to work changes upon it, changes that can alter one's sense of the present and future as well. Bergman's biggest challenge, therefore, is to come up with believable ways to make the road trip and the inner voyage, the present and the past, not just alternate or intersect, but coincide. To do so he employs a whole series of cinematic devices, some conventional and some not.

### *Conversations with people in the present.*

The presence of Marianne in the front seat beside him, someone with whom he can swap stories about the past as they both move forward to important milestones in their lives, is, of course, one of the main conventions of the road movie. For long stretches they have nothing to do but talk with each other. At first, communication is difficult, each is troubled; both are antagonistic, the conversation falters, and they keep their eyes on the road ahead—the actual journey continues to

predominate. Eventually, however, Marianne listens sympathetically, but not without criticism, to Isak's story, talks with him about it, and shares her own. By journey's end, their interchanges about Isak's past and its impact on Marianne's present have taught them to love and accept one another. Not only does this turn their one day road trip into a transformative journey into Isak's past, it also alters the ways in which both will behave when they disembark.

*Waking dreams that are either narrated or dramatized as though they were real.*

This is, of course, a variation on that old standby, the flashback. But Bergman's handling of it is both ingenious and, as far as I can tell, unique. Isak's first dream, the one occasioned by the wild strawberries, is partly narrated and partly dramatized, and Isak, the old man, is merely an observer. On the other hand, he is observing a past that he has never experienced—scenes involving his cousin Sara and his brother Sigfrid, and his cousin Sara and the rest of his extended family. Imagining them now provides him with a whole, new perspective on one of the key incidents of his youth—Sara's decision to leave him for his brother, and shows him for the first time that his past is still open to reinterpretation.

In his second and climactic dream, he becomes an active participant, again as an old man in these imagined reconstructions of his past. In fact, the two who carry on these dialogues with him, his cousin Sara and his wholly imagined judge and inquisitor, Alman, can also be seen as guides in this, the unconscious part of his journey.

Sara sits with him and explains, patiently but quite frankly, why she threw him over for his brother. He was just too dead and withdrawn for someone so full of life, and to prove her point she asks him to look at himself in the mirror.

Sara: Look at your face now. Try to smile! All right, now you're smiling.

Isak: It hurts.

Sara: You, a professor emeritus, ought to know why it hurts. But you don't. Because in spite of all your knowledge you don't really know anything.<sup>20</sup>

Not only is she dispensing advice that originally she had failed to do for fear of offending him, she is also helping him to acknowledge the severity of his problem—and helping him to smile.

Alman, his wholly imagined judge and inquisitor, plays a similar role in the second part of this dream. He attacks Isak both for his "incompetence" and his failure to love his wife, but his warnings and threats of punishment also force Isak to acknowledge his shortcomings and reflect anew upon them. The scene with Alman is in fact a more specific version of the dream that has prompted this whole quest, but with one important exception. Because Isak is now manifesting the courage to re-imagine all of his experience, the bad as well as the good, he is also discovering the power to change it.

*Symbolic encounters that break down the distinction between the past and the present, the real and the imagined, the first journey and the second.*

There are two of these: Sara the hitchhiker who doubles as the young cousin Sara from Isak's youth, and Mr. and Mrs. Alman, the feuding couple that joins them briefly in the car.

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<sup>20</sup> Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, 213.

That Sara the hitchhiker is a current incarnation of the cousin Sara of Isak's youth is, of course, obvious from the start. They are played by the same actress (Bibi Anderson), and she appears in the woods near Isak's old summer house immediately after he has encountered the original Sara in the same place in his first waking dream.

As such she not only conflates the two journeys, breaking down the distinction between the present and the past, she also represents Isak's chance to demonstrate in the present what he has presumably learned by reexamining his past. We learn from his dreams that Isak has been unable to flirt with his cousin, that they didn't even speak the same language. But in the present, her double finds him quick to smile and develops an instant rapport with wonderful, old Uncle Isak, flirting shamelessly with him as he flirts charmingly back. Then, near the end of the film, she bids Isak good bye by telling him that she loves him, a sentiment that Marianne now shares as well.

The Almans enter fighting (it's why they have crashed in the first place), continue to fight with increasing venom after Isak picks them up, and are still fighting when Marianne banishes them from the car. Their behavior is so awful, and their appearance and disappearance so sudden, that we begin to feel quite early on that like the hitchhiker, Sara, they are as much a part of the inner journey as the outer, and this is a suspicion that is later confirmed when they both reappear in the trial sequence of Isak's most troubling dream—Alman as the judge and inquisitor and his wife as the laughing woman whom Isak has falsely diagnosed as dead. Their name is also a reminder that they are symbolic rather than real characters

Given Marianne's extremely hostile response to Alman and his bleak, life denying behavior, it's easy to see him as a potential double for both Isak and his son, her husband Evald. Just as Isak's initial dream of his own death warns him that this is what will happen if he doesn't change, so is Alman a warning of what Isak will become if this present journey doesn't succeed.

All three of these devices—the retrospective conversations in the present, the waking and increasingly interactive dreams, and these two symbolic encounters—not only help us to perceive this journey as metaphorical as well as actual, a trip through time as well as a trip through space, they also dramatize that the past is still very much a part of the present. It does determine who we become, but the nature and extent of that influence are always open to reexamination and reinterpretation. Or to put it differently, the past cannot be denied even when it has become an obstacle in the way of our continued development, but it can be re-imagined and reapplied in ways that both reveal the integrity of our experience and liberate us from too narrow and fatalistic a perspective upon it.

No filmmaker since has so brilliantly dramatized the dynamics of what Robert Butler has called "the life review"<sup>21</sup>—the way in which the elder hero, if sufficiently open to new perspectives on the past, can continue to alter and reshape it and its impact on the present.

### **The Struggle**

From the dream sequence on, it is clear that Isak's real struggle is with himself. Its shocking images of his own death prompt him to seek answers to a number of suddenly crucial questions. *Have I really become so cold and unfeeling, more dead than alive? When did it happen? And how?*

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, R. N. "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged." *Psychiatry* 26 (1963): 65–76.

In Erikson's terms, this is a struggle between despair and integrity, the main developmental task of old age. It is also the struggle that makes Isak's journey an *Elderquest*. Internal and retrospective, it is both a quest for the integrity of one's experience, and a struggle to restore one's faith in life and love.

The first question is, of course, crucial, for nothing that follows would be possible without his admitting to his almost total withdrawal from emotional life. And yet this first admission is the hardest to make, so hard that he really can't be expected to make it on his own. That's why his daughter-in-law, Marianne (Ingrid Thulin), has come along as his guide. She is the first to accuse him of cruelty and unfeeling, and even though it takes him back, he is already open enough to change to be willing to listen.

On the other hand, both he and the audience must also believe that he is not so unfeeling as to be already dead and impervious to change. This is the role that has been assigned to the young hitchhiker, Sara, who likes Isak and flirts with him from the start. That she is being played by the same actress (Bibi Anderson) who plays the cousin Sara who had rejected him as a youth precisely because he would not flirt or be silly reminds us that his coldness though real, is apparently not irreversible.

The second question, *When did it happen and how?* is equally important and nearly as difficult for him to answer. The scenes with the young Sara suggest that he was guilty of nothing more serious than stiffness and a lack of gaiety and humor. Later the gas station attendant describes him as an extremely caring physician and friend. He and his wife have actually named their son after him. On the other hand, the dream sequence in which he is shown his wife's illicit love making as well as her explanation for why she did it—he treated her with lots of “understanding” but no feeling whatsoever—is the film's first indication of how unloving and hurtful Professor Borg had apparently become. The final indictment comes from Marianne. Isak's lack of love and withdrawal from emotional life have so blighted his son Evald, that he not only hates his father but has turned his back on life as well, threatening his marriage, and leading him to reject the child that Marianne is carrying.

As he sees and begins to accept the worst, Isak returns again and again to his family to find out how it all began. Marianne accompanies him on a visit to his mother, and her discomfort is palpable as she is almost overwhelmed by the old woman's emptiness and lack of feeling. But just as he has been loathe to judge himself so does he fail to judge her.

### **The Breakthrough**

**Wild Strawberries** is an *Elderquest* rather than the heroic quest of a younger, more traditional hero whose adversaries tend to be external rather than internal. Isak's breakthrough is therefore gradual, even tentative rather than sudden and triumphant. He doesn't slay a dragon, find a treasure, or save his kingdom, nor does he vanquish and completely reinvent himself. If he did, **Wild Strawberries** would be no more than an updated **Christmas Carol**.

The Dickens is a sentimental, totally unconvincing tale of a stingy, emotionally dead, old man so terrified by his dreams that he becomes a completely new and generous person over night. **Wild Strawberries** is a psychologically believable study of a temporarily misguided old man whose old defenses have begun to break down so completely that he is finally willing to listen to others (and his own unconscious) and reexamine the whole of his behavior from a multiplicity of new perspectives. And, as Bergman reminds us throughout the film, serious transformation, especially in later life, is never a question of starting over, sprouting totally new forms of behavior, or

practicing new and unfamiliar habits of mind. It is instead a question of finally being able to distinguish between those behaviors that are worth repeating and those that are not, and then remembering that one still has the power to choose between them. To arrive at such a perception is the real goal of Isak's quest, for it confirms that change is still possible if one has the will to effect it. But it won't happen overnight, or at the conclusion of a single day's travel. The seeds of change have taken root, but it will still take time, reflection, perseverance, and hard work to make them grow.

Isak's breakthroughs therefore are several—from the dream that opens the film to the dream that finally convinces him of the depths of his alienation, from his ability to flirt with the young Sara to his discovery that he really loves Marianne and is loved in return. But they do not include a complete transformation in the nature of his relationship with his son. Isak may be ready, but Evald is not, even though we do have the sense that Marianne and Isak, because of their new love and understanding for each other, will eventually be able to get through to Evald as well, saving his marriage and revitalizing his relationship with his father.

One reason for this optimism is the last and in many ways most interesting breakthrough, the one that takes place in the film's final sequence. It begins with a silent, visual reprise of a scene from one of his earlier dreams. In the middle distance his parents are fishing at the point. Pop is fishing, his back to Mom, and she sits seven or eight feet to his rear under a parasol on the grass. The young Isak calls and they both wave. Then, in the film's next and final image, Isak falls asleep in the present, a slight smile on his face.

What has he seen? Or what do we see for that matter? Final proof that there was nothing between his parents but a polite distance? Perhaps, for in the present at least his relationship with his aging mother seems empty and distant, but given the extent to which he has already begun to emerge from his shell, one can't help but think that his interpretation of this image (i.e., the character of his parents' relationship) is beginning to change. After all, what's so pernicious about doing separate things together? It seems, at least in this glimpse, to be pleasing to them both. In other words, his quest has not only helped him to love Marianne, Evald, and himself, it has led to his reassessing his parents' love for one another as well as himself.

### **The Return**

In the monomyth, the return is the time for the triumphant hero to share his spoils and/or his discoveries with the world. For Isak, the elder hero, it is the time to think more deeply of what he has learned about himself; only then will he be able to accept himself in this new role, change his behavior, and hope that others, especially his son Evald, will be able to recognize this change and benefit from it.

That Isak has come to perceive his quest as a profound, even transformative, experience is clear from the opening frame when he sits down to begin a journal that will contain "a true account of the events, dreams, and thoughts which befell me on a certain day."<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, he begins this journal by describing the kind of person he was before his quest and the disturbing dream that prompted it:

All I ask of life is to be let alone....Perhaps I ought to add that I am myself an old pedant, and at times quite trying both to myself and to the people who have to be

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<sup>22</sup> Bergman, *Four Screenplays*, 170.



around me. I detest emotional outbursts, women's tears, and the crying of children.<sup>23</sup>

In short, he knows something important has happened to him, and it has prompted him to tell the truth about it, but he is not yet certain of what that truth might consist. That's why he is re-imagining his trip by writing it down, so that he might reflect on its meaning yet again. This means, in effect, that his *Elderquest* is still in progress even though his actual journey is over. He hopes that by the end of this retelling, he will have a firmer grasp on what it has all meant, and if the way in which he has shaped his account is any indication, he clearly does. But he also knows that his actual return will be completed only when Evald also comes to understand its significance—for Isak and himself.

In other words, an *Elderquest* is such a risky and profound journey into one's psyche as well as one's past, that it's difficult to know when and if one has successfully returned. But the indisputable change in Marianne's feelings for Isak, and his for her, are proof enough that Isak has learned once again to reach out and love. Now all that remains is the creation of a loving relationship between Isak and Evald, and the quest will have become a successful one.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 169-170.

## Handout Six

### Plotting the Elderquest using *Wild Strawberries* as a Prototype

#### The Essential Components

#### *Wild Strawberries*

<b>The Elder Hero:</b> Age Sex State of mind and health Before departing	<b>76</b> <b>Male</b> Smug, self-satisfied
<b>The Call</b> Literally or figuratively: What motivates the quester to depart?	The dream of his own death
<b>The Search:</b> What is the searcher looking for? Is he/she certain or uncertain? Desperate or just Determined?	He's trying to figure where such a dark dream came from. Uncertain, Determined.
<b>The Journey</b> Direction? Pace? Means of Conveyance? Degree of difficulty?	Physical journey to Lund and honors, inner journey into his past and unhappiness. Slow with detours into the past, a 1937 (antique) Packard.
<b>The Guide</b> Who? How many? How helpful? How ready to heed his or her advice?	Five: Marianne, the two Saras, The gas station attendant, and Alman. The young Sara and the gas man are helpful; the others more confrontational. He listens but skeptically at first.
<b>The Struggle</b> With whom or what? Internal, external or both? Continuous or intermittent? How severe	Both internal and external, with himself and the people in his life, both past and present. Quite severe but intermittent.
<b>The Breakthrough</b> Gradual and subtle or sudden and dramatic? Physical, moral, or psychological? Surprising or expected? Believable or unbelievable?	Gradual and subtle but builds in intensity. Not physical but intensely moral and psychological- Not surprising but shocking nonetheless. Definitely believable.
<b>The Return</b> Successful or not? What's been learned? Is it being applied?	Successful but not completed either. The rediscovery of his capacity for love. A bit, but he must still win back the love of Evald.

## ***Handout Six (cont'd)***

### **Plotting the Elderquest using *Wild Strawberries* as a Prototype**

**Note:** The chart can then be used to analyze the rest of the Elderquest movies and novels.

#### **The Essential Components**

<b>The Elder Hero:</b> Age Sex State of mind and Health Before departing	
<b>The Call</b> Literally or Figuratively: What motivates the quester To depart	
<b>The Search:</b> What is the searcher looking for? Is he/she certain or uncertain? Desperate or just determined?	
<b>The Journey</b> Direction? Pace? Means of Conveyance? Degree of difficulty?	
<b>The Guide</b> Who? How many? How helpful? How ready to heed his or her advice?	
<b>The Struggle</b> With whom or what? Internal, external or both? Continuous or intermittent? How severe?	
<b>The Breakthrough</b> Gradual and subtle or sudden and dramatic? Physical, moral, or psychological? surprising or expected? Believable or unbelievable?	
<b>The Return</b> Successful or not? What's been learned? Is it being applied?	

### Reading *Wild Strawberries*:

We have chosen *Wild Strawberries* as our prototype for *The Elderquest* because it is the first of the modern *Elderquest* films<sup>24</sup> and one whose relevance to development in old age has already been commented upon frequently by psychologists and gerontologists, most notably Erik Erikson.<sup>25</sup> It is also a seminal film by one of the world's great filmmakers, and geniuses like Ingmar Bergman are often the first to uncover, or in this case, rediscover archetypes. This, for example, is what Erikson has to say about Bergman's masterpiece:

..... we believe that we can best begin to demonstrate more pictorially some of the dynamics of the interwoven stages of human life, as they culminate in old age, by outlining the scenes and the themes that reveal, in Bergman's drama, an old man's search for his life's transcendent meaning; and by claiming that all old people are involved in some such search, whether they—or we—know it or not.<sup>26</sup>

Even though we agree that Professor Borg's "search for his life's transcendent meaning" is the same search upon which we are all embarked, we do not intend to define it for you. To the contrary, by viewing and then discussing *Wild Strawberries* and the other films in our series, we're counting on your input to help us all to come up with a tentative, working definition of *the Elderquest* as an emerging archetype.

To do so we will have to consider a number of equally important questions: What kind of people embark on these late-life journeys? Why? Do they know what they're looking for? Are they all looking for the same things or do their motives for departing vary considerably? How do their motives and their journeys differ from those characteristic of life's earlier transformative journeys? Where do these elderheroes and heroines tend to go and at what pace? Do they travel alone or in the company of others? What are their chances of success? How do their journeys end? How, if any, have their lives been changed in the process? And finally, and most importantly, how do all these journeys compare to your own?

To answer these general questions, we will first need to consider those questions raised by each of our films.

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<sup>24</sup> See footnote 13 for our reasons for not calling Kurosawa's earlier *Ikiru* an *Elderquest*.

<sup>25</sup> Refer to **Part Five: Bibliography of Books and Articles on the Course's Films and Novels** for these other studies of *Wild Strawberries*.

<sup>26</sup> *Vital Involvement in Old Age*, 240.

## Some Questions for Discussion

1. The title sequence establishes that what we are about to see is Professor Isak Borg's retrospective version (complete with voice-over narration) of something important that happened to him recently. Why does Bergman frame his story in this way? How does it affect our perception (and understanding) of Isak's journey to know that what we are seeing is his own reconstruction and review of what happened? Is he, for example, a reliable narrator? Has he already been changed by what has happened or is he still trying to decide?
2. What do you make of Isak's dream? What does he make of it? It prompts him to cancel his plans to fly to Lund and to drive there instead. Why? Have you ever done something because of a dream?
3. Why does his daughter-in-law Marianne decide to accompany him? Is she there merely as a guide (and goad) on Isak's journey, or is she embarked on a journey of her own? The changing nature of this father/daughter-in-law relationship is key to an understanding of the film and all its journeys. How does it begin? What are the first signs that it might be changing?
4. By deciding to drive to Lund, Isak has turned one journey into two. What are they? How do they relate to one another? What does Bergman gain by having them take place simultaneously? Do they remain parallel and contrasting or do they sometimes intersect?
5. How much do you know about road movies? Can you cite a few? What kinds of people usually star in them? What kinds of vehicles do they tend to drive? Is this a road movie? How is it similar to these others films? How different? The vehicle is a 1930's Packard, a vintage car even in the fifties when the film was made. It's so big that it even has three rows of seats. Why is this an appropriate choice?
6. Isak's journey is full of side trips, stops, and unexpected encounters, What do you make of this fitful, unpredictable, and slow progress, a pace that threatens to make him late for the ceremony in Lund?
7. What is the purpose of the first "flashback"? Where does it take place? Is it a conscious memory or a dream? How do you react to the fact that Isak remains old even when he re-enters the past and talks with the friends and relatives of his youth? What does this say about the relationship between the present and the past? It's here that we first encounter the "wild strawberries" of the title. What do they stand for? What is most significant about this first meeting with his young cousin, Sara?
8. Immediately after this scene, Isak meets the hitchhikers, including the young Sara. Why does Bergman cast the same actress (Bibi Anderson) as both Saras? How are the two similar and/or different in their responses to Isak? What does this tell us about the relationship between the present and the past? About the capacity for significant change in our personalities, even in old age?
9. What do you make of the awful Almans? What's their role in Isak's *Elderquest*? Does your sense of them change when you discover them once again in the last and most disturbing of Isak's dreams?

10. By now it should be obvious that Isak's *Elderquest* is primarily a journey backward into his past, and that Bergman is showing us that past and defining its relationship with the present in a number of creative and unusual ways, many of them cinematic, that is, visual and possible only in the movies. We have already mentioned three examples of this: the casting of Bibi Anderson as both Saras, past and present; the insertion of the old Isak into the dramatization of scenes from his youth; and the visual and highly symbolic renderings of his dreams. What do you make of these others? The fact that Isak is also inserted into scenes from his youth where he wasn't originally there? The final image of his mother and father at the water's edge?
11. The meaning of Isak's past and its role in the present is also revealed in more conventional ways—by conversations and encounters with people in the present. Comment on the significance of the following: his ongoing dialogue with Marianne; his brief encounter with the gas station attendant; his visit to his mother's house; his conversations about and with his son, Evald; his relationship with his housekeeper, and his encounters with the hitchhikers.
12. What do you make of the film's final scenes—his conversation with Evald, the vision of his parents, and the look on his face as he falls asleep? Has he fully understood the meaning of his trip (*Elderquest*)? What impact will it have on his attitudes toward himself and his behavior with his loved ones?

### ***Summing Up***

Let's talk about what makes Isak the ideal or prototypical elder hero:

He's in his 70s (76).

His sudden awareness, no matter how dim or unconscious, that something is wrong, not with the world but with himself.

His courage, his willingness to answer the call, to listen to his instincts and true feelings and embark on an *Elderquest*—no matter how desperate or dangerous, to make the most of the journey, and to use its hard won truths to transform his attitudes and behaviors in the present.

His ability to open up, listen to, and trust others along the way.

His discovery that reviewing his life and reexamining his past is more than nostalgia or regret; it's a chance to view that past from a new perspective that can actually change its import and its meaning.

## ***Part Three***

### **The *Elderquest* in Today's Movies and Novels**

#### **Presentation Three: Reading *The Trip to Bountiful***

##### **Introduction**

Except for 20 minutes of exposition (70-something Ms. Watts—Geraldine Page—lives most unhappily with her son and daughter-in-law in a tiny apartment in 1940s Houston), ***The Trip to Bountiful* (1985)** is just that—a hauntingly beautiful, surprisingly funny, and increasingly bittersweet journey into an aging woman's remembered past.

"You can't go home again," we've all been told, and that's what everybody keeps telling Ms. Watts, and you can hardly blame them. After all, she does have heart trouble, and she is in her late 70s. Besides, the house is a ruin; the town is deserted, and the fields have become forests. Son Lutie (John Heard) and his wife Jessie Mae (Carlin Glynn) are dead set against it—it's too far (hundreds of miles down the Gulf Coast), it's too dangerous, and it's too expensive. The trains and buses don't even stop there anymore.

Why does she want to go? She can't really say, and she doesn't have any real plans; she "just had to," and she does, making it there and back (with a little luck along the way) in only two days. But those two days, despite their hardships and disappointments, their brevity and absence of dramatic incident, are, according to Ms. Watts, "more than enough to last me for the rest of my life."

Should we believe her? Why? What has she really accomplished? To whom has she spoken? What has she seen? And how will any of this make it any easier for her to live with Lutie and especially Jessie Mae? Why indeed should any of us allow our aging loved ones to embark on such potentially dangerous and vaguely defined odysseys into the past? What will they accomplish? Whom will they help?

These are tough and important questions, for young and old alike, and ***The Trip to Bountiful*** addresses them all. The authenticity of its answers, never predictable but always convincing, can be attributed in part to Horton Foote, who adapted his own play for the screen. But it's the brilliant, Oscar-award-winning performance by Geraldine Page that brings Ms. Watts' largely interior journey so luminously to life.

She responds to everything that befalls her throughout her journey with an uncomplicated and open-hearted emotional intensity that frightens and bewilders the unknowing and unsympathetic, but strikes a familiar and reassuring chord in those who are also open to the whole of life, its depths as well as its surfaces, its endings as well as its beginnings. Just watch the people who encounter her. Most either back off and roll their eyes or move forward to hear and learn more. Only the sheriff, who eventually drives her the last few miles, moves through bewilderment to understanding as he comes to know her and her quest more clearly.

What is it that we all find so fascinating (or frightening) about Ms. Watts and her trip? It is without question the unashamed urgency and desperation of her errand. This is her last chance to make peace with her past, to make sense of her life, to discover where she's come from and where she's going, and to prepare for death. If you haven't even begun to confront your own

mortality, you'll respond to Ms. Watts and her obsession in much the same way that many of the young respond to the old—as a crazy old fool on a fool's errand. Even if you do sympathize, like Lutie and the young girl on the bus (Rebecca DeMornay), you'll be worried about her failing—thanks to the Dust Bowl and the Depression, Bountiful clearly isn't Bountiful anymore. Its last inhabitant, and the only person Ms. Watts was hoping to see, has been buried the day before.

But in spite of all these warnings, Ms. Watts presses on, not knowing what to expect, but convinced that she has to know and experience it all, not just see or visit the old homestead, but experience its emptiness for herself. This part of the trip turns out to be very painful, and she weeps repeatedly for her losses. In fact, the outcome of the trip is in doubt right up until the last minute.

When Jessie Mae honks the horn impatiently, and Lutie grabs her arm, urging her to come, Ms. Watts breaks away and sinks to the porch sobbing, apparently in despair, "How did we come to this?" This, by the way, is the first indication that the trip has been for Lutie as well as for her, and he holds her, moving closer. Only then does Ms. Watts rally, yet again, and begin to piece together the real lesson learned from her trip, the ultimate meaning of their lives as she now understands it.

Turning away from the house and its memories of the family's decline, she looks to the fields and woods, at first musing and then insisting, "The fields, the trees, and the smell of the Gulf. I drew my strength from them not from the buildings and the people...and it's so eternally quiet. I'd forgotten the peace and the quiet." After that, her perspective expands even farther, as she muses on the cycle of rise and decline, of planting cotton, exhausting the soil, and moving away, of trees replacing cotton, only to be cut down again by a new generation of farmers. "We're part of all that; we left it, but we'll never lose what it's given us."

Jessie Mae then appears with a whole new list of demands—no pouting, no hymn singing while I'm around, etc. etc. But it's too late. Ms. Watts has gotten what she came for, and she's been able to give it to her son Lutie as well. Call it detachment, perspective, integrity and transcendence, or simply call it peace and understanding, but whatever it is, it's enough to hold off Jessie Mae. Ms. Watts no longer argues or pouts, instead she leans forward and kisses Jessie Mae on the cheek. Lutie soon displays the same kind of new-found strength when he contradicts Jessie Mae, insisting that she return the pension check to his mother. There's no denying it, even dim Jessie Mae is beginning to catch on. We're dealing with a *whole, new* Ms. Watts now, and, as the closing hymn underscores, she's *coming home*—to Jesus as well as to Houston, and she's ready for both because she has finally come home to Bountiful and the source of her strength.

## Questions for Discussion

### General

1. What do you make of the title? Is Bountiful still bountiful? Are its edenic fields (seen only in the title sequence) a paradise lost comparable to Bergman's wild strawberries, or are they something else as well?
2. How would you compare Ms. Watts' relationship to her son Lutie and her daughter-in-law Jessie Mae and their roles in her journey to Professor Borg's relationship to his son, Evald, and his daughter-in-law, Marianne, and their roles in his journey?



3. Which of these two journeys, Professor Borg's or Ms. Watts,' is more difficult, desperate, and/or dangerous? Which character is more sympathetic? With whom do you most identify?
4. Compare or contrast the ways in which these two journeys end—happily, unhappily, conclusively, inconclusively, realistically, unrealistically, etc.

### *In Houston*

1. How would you characterize Ms. Watts "predicament" on the eve of her departure? What apart from Jessie Mae are the sources of her discontent?
2. Why have Lutie and Jessie Mae so consistently opposed Ms. Watts's attempts to return to Bountiful? Do you share their concerns? Would you have "let her go"? Have you ever known a seventy-or-eighty-something with similar desires? What happened to them?

### *The Departure*

1. As soon as Ms. Watts escapes from the apartment, we all heave a sigh of relief, but even before she leaves Houston, we begin to have second thoughts. Why?
2. What do you make of the young girl at the bus station who helps Ms. Watts to elude Lutie and Jessie Mae? Why does she do it? Would you have done the same?

### *The Journey*

#### *On the bus*

As soon as Ms. Watts takes her seat and looks out with a sense of joy and expectation, **The Trip to Bountiful** becomes a road movie with all the conventions and expectations of that favorite American film genre. We're leaving the city for the country, confinement for release, complication for oversimplification. Just before the bus leaves Houston, it moves through a tunnel. After that, long shots of the bus moving through open country add to this sense of exhilaration and escape. Who knows what lies ahead? But it's got to be better than what we have left behind. When Ms. Watts begins to chat with the young, sympathetic girl next to her, the spell continues. Finally, here is someone who understands her, is willing to listen to her, and help her on her way. But night soon falls, the bus now moves through blackness, their conversation darkens, and we're reminded that the bus doesn't even go to Bountiful anymore.

1. 1. What does Ms. Watts say about her past, her plans for the future? How does the young girl respond?

#### *In the Harrison bus station*

This, the second stage of Ms. Watts' journey, is the darkest, and it's appropriate that it should take place in the middle of the night.

Once the bus leaves, we learn, in rapid succession, that Ms. Watts has forgotten her purse, that her only contact in Bountiful has died, that she has no real plan for getting there on her own, and that her helpful friend will soon be leaving. Things couldn't be worse, but how does Ms. Watts respond? Are you surprised? Is the young girl? Is her cheeriness reassuring?

1. When we hear that Lutie and Jessie Mae are coming to take her home, are you pleased or disappointed?
2. What do you make of the sheriff when he first appears? Is he more sympathetic than the night clerk?
3. Does Ms. Watts lose faith when she hears that she won't get to Bountiful after all?
4. What makes the sheriff change his mind and offer to drive her there? Is this transformation believable? Remember, her trip could not be completed without him.

### ***Arrival***

1. What do the sheriff and Ms. Watts talk about on her front porch? Are you surprised by the nature of their conversation? How does it make Ms. Watts feel?
2. Do you have the sense that Ms. Watts has found what she is looking for as she's left alone to poke around the house?
3. Why is Lutie so stand-offish when he first arrives? Is he angry at his mother? At himself? Does he really understand why she had to come? Why has he stayed away?
4. Lutie's speech draws mother and son together, but it makes them both feel worse. Why?

### ***Breakthrough***

Ms. Watts begins to talk about how she has lost "the source of her strength." And then quite obviously recovers it. How?

1. What exactly has she found and how will it help both her and Lutie in the future?

### ***Return***

When Jessie Mae walks up, more querulous and demanding than ever, the journey is over, and it's time for them all to return. What evidence do we have in this final scene that the trip has indeed given Ms. Watts "enough to last me for the rest of my life"?

1. How is Ms. Watts different? How do we know? How is Lutie different? Does it show? Will these changes have any impact on Jessie Mae?

## Presentation Four: Reading *The Straight Story*

### Introduction

**The Straight Story** (1999) may be the best evidence yet that Hollywood really does understand that its audience is getting older. It was made by The Walt Disney Studios, and directed by none other than David Lynch, the darling of the 20- and-30-somethings and the creator of **Twin Peaks**, **Blue Velvet**, and **Lost Highways** (which one critic has called “the road movie from hell”). Perfectly titled and brilliantly realized, it is both an honest story of old age confronted and redeemed, and the true story of 73-year-old Iowan Alvin Straight’s journey by John Deere® riding mower to visit his estranged and ailing brother in Wisconsin more than 350 miles away.

Above all, **The Straight Story** is a road movie. This favorite American film genre takes its characters out on the open road, usually at high speeds and with little sense of direction, as they either avoid their old responsibilities or look to find new and more exciting ones. It is, of course, a variation on the hero’s quest, and it is also extremely flexible and adaptable. **The Grapes of Wrath**, for example, thrusts the Joads on to the open road because they have no choice, but also because they continue to believe in a better future, this time in California. **Easy Rider** uses the biker variation of the genre to glorify hippies and the sixties’ flawed romanticism. **Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid** glorifies the lyricism, wildness, and self-destruction at the heart of the frontier myth, and **Thelma and Louise** updates that same myth by showing that women can be just as wild and hopeless. In fact, since the sixties, road movies have gotten bleaker and bleaker, ending more often than not in failure and death.

But **The Straight Story** is only the second American road movie to take a really old man out for a spin. The first was **Harry and Tonto** (1974), and it too features an academy-award-winning performance by its star Art Carney who crosses the country with his cat. (Note: Carney plays a character in his mid 70s, but was only 59 at the time).

But even though it is based on a true story, this is not a realistic film; that is not David Lynch’s style. Look, for example, at the way in which he presents the people who surround Straight in his home town. Everyone is old, slightly retarded or fat—a collection of lovable but slow moving left behinds who seem rooted in place because movement of any sort has become difficult. Sissy Spacek who plays Alvin’s slightly retarded, middle-aged daughter Rose copes by building bird houses (“this one has a b-b-blue roof”), but she spends most of her time pining for the children she’s lost to the state because one of them was injured in a fire that wasn’t her fault. The shopkeeper wheezes, the next-door neighbor snoops, the pacing is glacially slow, and everybody keeps repeating, “Geez, Alvin” whenever the old man shows any signs of life. It’s all a bit weird, and we begin to suspect that we’re in for another **Blue Velvet**.

It is also evident from the start that Alvin is a different sort of character altogether, one who barely belongs to the same species as all these laughable losers. He listens to no one—his friends, his doctor, not even his daughter; nor does he trust them with his secrets. Visually, he is shown more often than not in extreme close up, revealing both his vulnerability and his extreme dignity and pride. First, we are told that he is under sentence of death unless he changes his ways, and he obviously has no intention of doing so. Then when he hears of his brother Alvin’s stroke, the camera looks up into his ravaged and troubled face while lightning illuminates it and thunder cracks. He may not be Lear; he knows himself too well for that, but from here on his isolation as well as his single-minded determination transform him into an epic hero in spite of what his daughter and his friends think. Richard Farnsworth’s brilliant acting is partially responsible for this; he won’t let us dismiss Alvin as

an old coot. To the contrary, he forces us to identify with him, every step along the way, even though he's a physical wreck (his neck is more ravaged and wrinkled than any I have ever seen), and his plan is clearly a cockeyed one. (At 79, Farnsworth was actually six years older than the character he plays, had terminal cancer, and died soon after the film was finished.)

After one false start, Alvin takes to the road, straddling the shoulder and averaging perhaps ten miles a day, and the film finally hits its stride—which is a good deal slower than a walk. But that's precisely the pace at which late-life adventures unfold, and Lynch and his cinematographer force us to slow down with him and enjoy the ride. The music by The Radio Ranch Straight Shooters—slow, haunting and full of country fiddlin'—helps too, as do the frequent aerial shots which show us Alvin—small, insignificant, and barely moving midst the endless corn and sky. Perseverance and thrift, not profligacy and speed, will have to be his weapons if he hopes to achieve his goal, and gradually we discover that he has plenty of both. He may look like a cowboy who is once again, as Huck Finn put it, “lightin' out for the territory ahead,” but he is also an old man on his last journey, moving forward but oh so slowly, and in no way shirking his responsibilities or turning his back on his past.

It's a truly epic journey, proving that there are heroic feats still to accomplish even when one is in one's 70s. First, there are the obstacles and regrets to overcome. We hear of Alvin's WWII memories (he has accidentally shot one of his own men), his love for his daughter, and his sorrow about having fallen out with his brother Lyle. He also gripes about his infirmities, displays real fear and hesitation, and laments his lost youth. But his courage, independence, and determination are evident from the start, and it's this sense of purpose that lifts him up and out of himself, allowing him to dispense advice and earn the respect of those he encounters along the way—young and old alike.

When he finally does arrive, the reunion is accomplished with masterly and extremely moving understatement. The two men never touch, and their only exchange goes like this, Lyle: “Did you ride that thing all the way out here to see me?” Alvin: “I did Lyle.” I was reminded of a comment by Mary Pipher in her book about navigating the emotional terrain of our elders, **Another Country**. In it, she admits that being a therapist in the Midwest means that you can't always assume that words are necessary. Old Midwestern farmers and cowboys like Alvin and Lyle may not say much, may not even be able to talk about their feelings, but that doesn't mean that they don't have them. Watch this final scene, and you'll know exactly what she means.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Cinematically, one of this film's most striking features is its extremely slow pace. Does it ever surprise you or irritate you? At what point do you begin to discover that slow is not only appropriate for this story but essential? Remember, most road movies, including Lynch's earlier ones, take place at a breakneck pace. What, according to the film, are the advantages and disadvantages of the slow pace? Think of scenes that speak to both of these answers.
2. Be aware that this is a film that uses an enormous number of extreme close-ups. When do you begin to notice this? Pick a scene, for example, the bar room conversation between Alvin and the other older man about their World War II experiences, and explain how this technique is used to heighten the emotion and

increase the drama.

3. What do the aerial shots, the other overhead shots, and the shots of the cornfields and surrounding landscape add to our experience of Alvin's journey? What about the music?
4. The encounter with the speeding woman who kills the deer is the least realistic, most symbolic, and most Lynchean of Alvin's adventures on the road. Why was it included? What encounter immediately precedes it? How are they different? The final shot in this sequence—Alvin eating the deer and surrounded by obviously plastic deer—is clearly meant to be funny. Is it? Is this whole scene funny? Why? Why not?
5. One of the film's many ironies is its title, for clearly Lynch loved its story precisely because it is not "straight," is in fact quite metaphoric or symbolic, more than one man's crazy escapade on a riding mower. What does Lynch do as a director that makes it easier for us to view the film in this way, to know that this is primarily a symbolic journey? Can you cite specific shots that somehow represent the position of the frail old in today's America?

#### *As Story*

1. The real Alvin Straight died a few years before Lynch and his writers decided to make this film so all the incidents along the way are purely fictional. Pick one—the encounter with the young bikers, the night spent with the pregnant runaway, the layover while his mower is being repaired—and talk about its narrative purpose. What does it add to the story and its meaning?
2. Discuss Alvin's relations with the other characters in the film, before he leaves, along the way, and after he arrives.
3. Mainly this is a story that celebrates Alvin's courage, wisdom, and determination, but it is also satirical at times. What or who is being satirized?
4. At what time of year does the story take place? Why? What does this add?
5. What does Alvin's near catastrophe when he careens down the hill out of control, add to the story and its meaning?
6. Why does Alvin's tractor die just before he arrives at his brother's? What does he do first? Why? What eventually happens? What does all of this add to the symbolic import of the journey?
7. Do you wonder what will happen to Alvin after he gets to his brother's? Why? Why not?

#### *As an Elderquest*

1. How is Alvin's *Elderquest* similar or different from the others?

2. Why does he leave? Is this a conscious decision or something that he had to do? Are his reasons similar or different from those of our other elderquesters?
3. Alvin's quest is, along with the ones in **Central Station** and the novel **Praisesong for the Widow**, very physically demanding, a journey that requires physical courage and endurance as well as moral and emotional strength. How then is it different from the heroic quests of midlife?
4. Does Alvin learn anything along the way?
5. Does he change those whom he meets?
6. Alvin, unlike most of our other elderquesters, does not return from whence he came? Why not?
7. In the course of his journey, Alvin earns just about everyone's respect. Why? Be as specific as possible about the character traits and moral values that earn him this universal admiration and respect.
8. At one point, en route, Alvin says that the hardest part about growing old is remembering when you were young. Do you agree?
9. Does Alvin have any guides along the way or does he complete his journey on his own?

## Presentation Five: Reading *Central Station*

### Introduction

Note: Some of this analysis comes from the highly recommended commentary by its director, its producer, and its star that is included with the DVD version of **Central Station**.

### As Film

Cinematically, the most striking feature of **Central Station** is its realism. Director Walter Salles acknowledges his debt to Brazil's Cinema Novo of the 1960s and the Italian neo-realism of Vittorio de Sica, Roberto Rossellini, and others in the 1940s. Both film movements took the camera from the studio to the streets to reveal the poverty and injustice being heaped on their countrymen, but even more importantly they reveal the dignity, the faith, and the humanity of these victims of social oppression (see, for example, **The Bicycle Thief**, which some critics have compared to **Central Station**).

This kind of realism is more than a social philosophy and a series of film techniques—hand-held cameras, real settings, and the use of non-professional actors. It also insists that cinematic truth is a direct result of the ways in which the real and the imagined are made to interact while the film is being shot. Salles, his actors, and crew are masters of this process which Salles calls “mysterious,” and it is one of the main reasons for the power and deep resonance of this film. It feels so real because much of it is; it seems so universal and true because of the ways in which Salles and his crew have helped these “truths” to emerge from the real.

What, for example, does Rio's Central Station come to mean in the opening sequences of the film and how is this transformation from setting to something far more significant and sinister accomplished?

Let's start with the letter-dictating scene in the beginning of the film. Salles set up Fernanda Montenegro (the brilliant stage actress who plays Dona Dora) as a letter writer for the illiterate in the midst of the actual station, but told no one that she was acting in a film (he hid the cameras and the sound equipment). Real people then approached her and poured out their hearts in real letters to their loved ones. We see their faces in tight close up as they dictate, and they are genuine, spirited, and completely unguarded—we like them and connect to them instantly. We also see equally tight close ups of Dona Dora, prompting them and writing, but whenever she and they are visible in the same frame, there is no depth of field, only Dora is in focus. In other words, she can't really see them clearly, unlike us she is not connecting to them, because, as we are soon to discover, she has no intention of mailing their letters. To the contrary, she makes cruel and cynical fun of them and their writers.

When 10-year-old Josue and his mother (both actors in the film) approach so that they can dictate, we are moving from reality to fiction, but the content of that fiction is quite similar to and intensified by the reality that precedes it—with one notable exception. While his mother dictates and Dora writes, we see the boy look towards Dora with suspicion and distrust, as though he were seeing right through her cruel charade—an important foreshadowing of what is to come, as he will be forced to trust her against his better judgment and is repeatedly betrayed.

There are two other interactions between reality and the scripted at work in this scene, Josue is not a professional actor, but a 10-year-old shoeshine boy (Vinicius de Oliveira) whom Salles encountered in a Rio airport. Neither homeless nor desperate, Oliveira did, however, have to work to bolster the family's income. What we witness then as Oliveira acts and develops Josue as a character owes much to the person he actually is, making the “acting” extremely authentic, convincing, and real. Later, when Josue discovers that he and Dora are more similar than different, both outcasts and both looking for the love they have never received

from their lost fathers, Olivera was himself changed by this perception, according to both Salles and Montenegro.

Finally, as Salles mentions proudly in his full length commentary on the film available in the DVD version, one of the real people who dictated a letter to Dora actually found her long lost loved one as a consequence (which is of course what the film is all about).

Hidden cameras and sound equipment are also employed in most of the other shots in the station, so that Dora and then Josue are the only fictional characters enmeshed in shots so crowded and bewildering that it is difficult to pick them out. When a young boy is shot for shoplifting in one sequence, we are watching a reenactment by actors of an actual event that had come to symbolize for Salles and many Brazilians the callousness and inhumanity that can characterize life in the station, and by extension life for the poor and displaced who have been brought by train from the country to find a new life in the city and are then so cruelly ignored and abused once they arrive.

As a consequence of this almost seamless interaction between reality and its manipulation, Rio's Central Station emerges as a frightening and identity-stealing kind of place where the naïve and still trustful are both abused and ignored. Dona embodies the abusers, isolated, cynical, and cruel, while Josue and the letter writers embody the innocence they trample and betray. When the death of Josue's mother thrusts the two of them together, and they leave Central Station, we are more apprehensive than relieved.

Salles also rehearsed his actors for weeks in a studio before he asked them to perform before cameras in the many real settings he had spent more than a year scouting before filming began. Convinced that "geography determines character," he wanted his cast to be so familiar with their lines that they would be aware of and ready to respond to feelings aroused by their new surroundings. He also wanted his screenwriters to be open to on-the-spot improvisations and changes prompted by the new realities in which the story was being played out.

The pilgrimage scene, the real turning point in the relationship between Dora and Josue, is an excellent place to witness the impact of these two additional ingredients in Salles' realism. Salles had witnessed the actual pilgrimage during his scene-scouting expedition and videotaped it for further reference. When it came time to shoot this critical scene, he then hired hundreds of real pilgrims to stage another pilgrimage in front of his cameras.

What happened is entirely predictable, the faux pilgrimage quickly became real, and the extras stopped acting, a development that had a profound impact on both Montenegro and Olivera and the performances they gave. One of the many script changes that resulted was the inclusion of the scene where Dora and Josue have their photo taken by the photographer/vendor who showed up for the restaging of the pilgrimage. Then, in the film's closing scenes, each takes out this photo as they part.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Dora seems to change physically as well as emotionally and spiritually in the course of her journey. Can you recall shots which show her paying more attention to her appearance? Where, when, and why do they occur? Do you agree that she looks different at the end of the film? In what way? How has the director emphasized these changes?
2. Increased camera movement usually denotes crisis and excitement of some kind. What did you notice about the camera movement in the nighttime sequence during the pilgrimage when Josue runs away and Dora tries to find him? What about camera angles in this sequence?



3. In spite of its realism, **Central Station** also has a number of carefully composed shots, perhaps the most striking is the reversed pieta on the morning after Dora's collapse at the pilgrimage. What does it signify? The other comes at film's end, when Dora puts the one letter next to the other before she leaves. What does this signify? Are you pleased or bothered by these artistic and arranged intrusions into what is otherwise meant to look so real and unarranged? Can you think of other examples of shots that stood out for their beauty, their composition, their memorability?
4. Apart from the road itself, there are three main settings in this film—Central Station, the pilgrimage town, and the settlement community where Josue finds his family. How are they different, similar, visually as well as emotionally? Do you think Josue and his brothers can find happiness in the third setting?

### As Story

In spite of its extraordinary realism, **Central Station** is a fictional film and its power and memorability also stem from its inspirational story. Written, amazingly, by two 24-year olds, **Central Station** takes us on not one but two journeys—the *Elderquest* of 60-something, totally cynical and therefore infinitely lonely Dona Dora, and a quest for his father, faith, and a sense of identity by the desperate but plucky 10-year-old Josue.

Dora, a letter writer for the poor and illiterate, travels to Central Station daily to take their money and abuse their trust. Incapable of connection herself, she denies it to them by belittling their feelings and either hoarding or destroying their letters. She seems, in short, beyond redemption, beneath contempt, and incapable of a quest of any kind. Transformation, if it is to occur, will have to be thrust upon her, against her will, again and again, and that is exactly what happens, thanks to the appearance of Josue, the film's second quester, and the character who, in the words of director, Walter Salles, is Dona's "transforming angel."

Josue, unlike Dora, is not without hope and already on a quest—to find Jesus, the father he has never seen. But his mother is killed just after dictating a letter to Jesus, and Josue is forced to return to Dora for help. First she ignores him; then she betrays him—by selling him to an "adoption agency." Then when she relents and steals him back, she leaves Rio with him solely because she fears for her life.

They begin, therefore, not as fellow questers but as antagonists—Dora tries to betray Josue several times, and he responds by mistrusting and hating her. Then, they become reluctant allies on a quest that both perceive as his/her own. Then, as a result of an extraordinary series of trials, misfortunes, and failures, it dawns on them both that they have no one to turn to but each other, and that Dora, whether she has willed it or not, is on a quest of her own.

Eventually, in an even more startling turn, both come to realize that they are similar in more ways than they are different, and that both are in fact on the same quest—a search for a new faith in the fathers they have never really known.

Finally, in the film's closing scenes, both find what they have been looking for—Jesus, love, faith, a new sense of family and connection, and a second chance. Then they part. Even though each has helped the other along the way, both know that they now have new, connected but separate lives to live—Josue as a young man with a fresh start, and Dora as an old woman who has been all but completely transformed—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why does Dora take Josue home with her?

2. After, she sells him to the “adoption agency,” she changes her mind and steals him back. What prompts this reversal? Is this the beginning of her *Elderquest*? Her call?
3. Why does Josue refuse to go on without her when she buys a ticket to return to Rio?
4. How many times does Dora try to betray Josue? When does she stop? This is presumably the breakthrough in her quest. Where does it occur? Is it convincing? Why? Is hers a religious conversion too? What is the next frame immediately following this breakthrough?
5. Why does Josue suggest that they write letters at the pilgrimage? Does he expect her to throw them away? When she doesn’t, how does this affect their relationship? Is this when their two quests become one?
6. When they go to the first house in the settlement, the man who answers the door says, “Jesus doesn’t live here anymore.” If you had missed it earlier, this makes it obvious that naming the father Jesus was intentional and complicates their quest. How?
7. When Dora and Josue walk down the street after this disappointment, they talk of returning to Rio together. Is this an alternative ending to their quest? (Salles says that he wanted the shot of them walking away from us in silhouette to be reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin). Did you think the film was over? Would you have preferred this ending? Why? Why not?
8. What is Jesus’s letter about? Is Dora lying when she says that Josue has been mentioned in the letter? Does it matter?
9. Why does Dora leave? Do you agree that she should? Does Josue? What do you suppose will happen to them both? Will they keep in touch? How deeply has Dora been transformed by her quest?

## Presentation Six: Reading *Praisesong for the Widow*

### Introduction

Paule Marshall's **Praisesong for the Widow** is an extraordinarily ambitious novel, for Avey Johnson's harrowing struggle to regain her lost sense of self is much more than a 64-year-old widow's search for the love and meaning that had gone out of her marriage some 30 years before. It is an archetypal quest for her African and Caribbean "nation," the long forgotten source of her identity and strength, which she as avatara, the godlike heroine, must rediscover if she is to restore a sense of confraternity and pride not just to herself and her immediate family, but to all African Americans. By the novel's end she has completed the first of these, is making plans that will help her to complete the second, and I am sure Paule Marshall would agree that she will also complete the third if enough readers are moved by her story.

Does this mean that the quest in **Praisesong for the Widow** is a specifically African-American one? Of course, and as such it is an especially harrowing one that calls for extreme measures to renounce the alienation of the present and rediscover the connections to an all but obliterated past, and we will turn to these in our questions for discussion. But this cultural and racial specificity does not prevent Avey's journey from being an *Elderquest* too, for her age, as well as her race and gender, plays an important role in the nature of her truly heroic quest.

It may also be worth noting that Marshall has written another book in which the central characters, this time men, are aging. It is entitled **Soul Clap Hands and Sing**, which is a reference to

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress  
W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*

### Questions for Discussion

1. How deeply estranged from her origins Avey has become is stressed again and again in the novel's opening scenes. Her real name is Avatara, but she has been known as Avey for years and has all but forgotten its meaning. She has moved from Aunt Cluny's Tatem and the Landing to Harlem and then to North White Plains and is now sailing the Caribbean not as a native but as a tourist on The Bianca Pride. Why then does she want to jump ship and return home?
2. Like Professor Borg, Avey first senses that something is amiss in a dream. Why? What is it that this dream is trying to tell her?
3. Why do you suppose Marshall makes her sick as well?
4. Later on deck, Avey sees things "that are well beyond her comprehension," a phrase and an insistence that are repeated several times during her quest. What is this all about?
5. Her lady friends oppose her decision to leave, and yet she feels as she departs as though they looked like they wanted to come too. Why? Has this happened in our other *Elderquests*? Again, why?

6. How long does Avey maintain her insistence that she just wants to fly home? Why?
7. Is Avey receptive to the advice of guides? Who are they? What do they advise? Does her attitude toward guides change? When? Why? With whom?
8. All of Part II, *Sleeper's Wake*, is Avey's dream in her Grenada hotel. Why? What do you make of this title? What do we learn of her past? Does this make her decision to jump ship clearer to her? To the reader?
9. One turning point in this dream takes place on p. 111, when Jay threatens to leave and actually has one foot out the door. What does this signify to Avey?
10. The dream ends with another fight with Aunt Cluny, one that is so real that it actually leaves her bruised. Why is this struggle so violent? What does it signify?
11. How does Avey meet Lebert Joseph? When does he start to be interested in her and why? When does she start to trust him? What does he want her to do?
12. He tells her that he knows other "People who can't call their nation." What does he mean? Have you known people like this? Have you ever felt like this?
13. When she is about to accept his offer to accompany her on the excursion to Carriacou, she at first demurs: Who knows what might happen? And he responds (p. 183) "Is true. You don't know what's to happen in this life." This is precisely how one must think if one is to embark on a successful quest. Discuss.
14. What happens to Avey on the boat over? Why?
15. Describe the Beg Pardon and Avey's participation. Can you relate even if you are not African-American? Is this a convincing climax and breakthrough in her quest?
16. What do you make of her plans for the future in the last three pages of the novel? Again, are they convincing, believable?

## Presentation Seven: Reading *About Schmidt*

### Introduction

Although this is the only failed *Elderquest* we will be considering, chances are it is the film that the largest number of our students have already seen. Jack Nicholson's super-star status, his hilarious performance as Warren Schmidt, and the chance to see him playing opposite Kathy Bates, especially in a hot tub, are the most obvious reasons for the popularity of this really quite grim and devastating film.

While this does mean that we may receive less criticism "for spoiling the film" by saying anything about it in advance, it is a shame that most moviegoers who have seen this anti-*Elderquest* are unaware that there are many more successful and reassuring *Elderquests* out there. (There are, however, other failed *Elderquests* as well. The earliest is Woody Allen's **Deconstructing Harry** which is both a funny parody of **Wild Strawberries** and a defense of Allen's emotional isolation and cruelty. His quest may end in disaster, but he really didn't need it anyway; he has his art. More recently, there is Jim Jarmusch's **Broken Flowers**, which a Boston Globe reviewer called "the film **About Schmidt** should have been." We agree and highly recommend this in some ways very similar film. In fact, if it appears in DVD in time for its use in the program, it might be substituted for **About Schmidt**. It raises the same questions, but in a more serious way. One might even argue that in the end, Bill Murray's clueless quester does begin to see the light. (We'd be happy to confer with any facilitators who do decide to substitute this film.)

The differences between this and our other films (and novels) should be obvious from the start. They tend to be realistic; **About Schmidt** is such broad, merciless satire filled with so many exaggerations and distortions that it borders on farce. Retirement can't be this bleak, can it? Nor can the Midwest and all Midwesterners be this bad, although a city whose tallest building shouts Woodmen from its top does give one pause. One is reminded of David Lynch's portrayal of the fat, slow, slightly retarded left-behinds in Alvin Straight's hometown, but at least they appreciate the heroism of his effort.

Our other *Elderquests* demonstrate, as the director of **Central Station** says of his idol Roberto Rosellini, "that there are lots of friends in the world." Here our hero is so clueless and shut down that he wouldn't recognize a friend if he did have one. Besides, all the film's other characters, including his wife, his daughter, and his in-laws, are people who are so unsympathetically portrayed that we are invited to share Schmidt's disdain for them. If he fails to find connection in the course of his quest, it is hard to decide whether the fault is his or the world in which he lives.

Nonetheless, as the study questions are designed to demonstrate, this quite bloodless parody of an *Elderquest* does contain all of its essential components—few of which were present in the Louis Begley novel on which it is based. And, since parody is the sincerest form of tribute, **About Schmidt**, in a perverse way, is yet another sign that this new and more positive narrative of aging is making its presence felt. Even poor Warren Schmidt feels that it's what he ought to do to make sense of his golden years even though he can do no more than go through the motions.

Why then did director Alexander Payne change Begley's novel so drastically and make **About Schmidt** such a devastating black comedy about retirement and the Midwest, turning it into a parody of the *Elderquest* in the process?

For one thing, Payne is himself from the Midwest; all of his films are set there, and they all satirize it for its emptiness, its bad taste, and its life-denying, small town, middle-class values. Secondly, as we have noted earlier, the road movie is the favorite Hollywood vehicle (no pun intended) for capturing the struggles of a character in stress and transition. And finally, when dealing with characters of retirement age, it seems that more and more of today's directors and writers are turning to *Elderquests*—even when their real point is to demonstrate that even though we may need them desperately, they're all but impossible to pull off.

One is reminded of Vaclav Havel's reason for writing absurd plays:

They can be seen as outright comedies. The plays are not—and this is important—nihilistic. They are merely a warning. In a very shocking way, they throw us into the question of meaning by manifesting its absence.

*Writing for the Stage in Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala (54)*

Isn't this a perfect gloss on the scene in the trailer park when a woman Schmidt has just met tells him, with heartbreaking accuracy, that he is a very sad, very lonely, and very angry man, and he responds with a pass, she with total outrage and not a shred of sympathy. In other words, meaning (or truth) does emerge, but just fleetingly, and it results in nothing but misunderstanding and a further breakdown in communications.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The credits and the opening sequence set the tone for the whole film. Our first glimpse of Schmidt sitting at his desk and watching the clock strike five on his last day at the office follows immediately an aerial shot of the Woodmen sign at the top of his office building. Comment on this juxtaposition and the *mis en scene*, shots, and editing in this opening sequence. What do they tell us of Schmidt? His work life? His approach to retirement? How does it make us feel about his situation? Is it funny? Grotesque? Sad?  
Note: If you have the DVD version of this film, look at the series of short films about the Woodmen Tower commissioned by Payne. What are they all about?
2. What is satire? What is its point? What does the satirist want us to think, feel, or do after we have watched his work? What does the fact that it is supposed to be funny have to do with its point? Use the film's second sequence to illustrate your answers. Schmidt's retirement dinner is obviously being satirized. The décor is awful, the speeches are vapid, and even Schmidt is made to feel useless and empty. This is also the first scene in which shots of cattle suggest that Schmidt (and everyone else in this scene) has about as much character and life as a dumb ox. There are others, culminating in the shot in which a cattle truck passes him while he is out in his camper and he looks over at the steers who are peering over at him. (By the way, it took three screenings for me to notice, but while Schmidt attends his wife's funeral, he looks over at this same cattle truck being washed and prepared.) Is this social commentary? Farce? Why do we laugh?
3. The scene in which Schmidt returns to his office, is rebuffed, and then finds the file boxes that represent his life's work out on the street is the first one in which we begin to feel real sympathy (or pity) for him. Does this feeling build, fluctuate, or diminish? In other

- words, are we being invited to sympathize or identify with Schmidt or to look down on him either with pity or judgment?
4. What do you make of his whole “relationship” with Ndugu? Is it a sign that what Kafka calls “the frozen sea within” is finally beginning to melt? Or is it more evidence that Schmidt is totally isolated and delusional?
  5. What prompts Schmidt’s decision to embark on an *Elderquest*? Are these reasons similar to or different from those found in the other films and novels?
  6. Before she dies, Schmidt’s wife tells him that she bought the camper so that it could provide them with a new life in their golden years? Why is this so ironic?
  7. Is Schmidt’s discovery that his birthplace has become a tire store, sad, pathetic, funny, real? Discuss your reactions to this scene.
  8. Is there any point in Schmidt’s journey when you begin to feel that it is actually doing him some good? Does he know what such a quest is meant to accomplish? If so, why can’t he accomplish it?
  9. Do you think that director Payne is making fun of quests or making fun of Schmidt’s inept approach to them?
  10. Schmidt’s decision to speak his mind on his arrival in Denver sounds like a breakthrough. Why isn’t it?
  11. The most hilarious scenes in the whole film have to be Schmidt’s attempts to get comfortable in the waterbed, his reactions to the percodan that Kathy Bates has given him to relax, and his encounter with her in the hot tub. Did you laugh? Why? What more, if anything, do they tell us about not Jack Nicholson but Warren Schmidt?
  12. Elderquesters need guides. Why doesn’t Schmidt have one? Are there people in the film who try to act as guides? Would they have made good ones?
  13. What do you make of Schmidt’s return and his letter from Ndugu?
  14. What is this whole film telling us about retirement? About the problems that confront aging men?

## Presentation Eight: Reading *Carry Me Across the Water*

### Introduction

The best way to begin the study of this wonderful novel is to turn to the interview with author Ethan Canin that is included in the *Study Guide* at the back of the paperback edition. In it Canin tells us that his novel is about an elderly and very successful Jewish brewer's struggle to find "the gentle soul hidden in fear behind the fierce one." This characterization of his book is enough to tell us that this is an *Elderquest*, that his hero is seeking at age 78 to replace the values and behaviors that worked for him in youth and midlife with others that are less aggressive, more appropriate, maybe even less guilt-inducing in old age.

But, as Canin also tells us, it is the way in which he presents his hero's struggle that provides us with a unique, inside perspective on the nature and purpose of this special kind of late-life quest. He foregoes the traditional, chronological narrative and replaces it with short "jags of startling recollection" that plunge us directly into Klienman's memory and propel us from one place to another as well as forward and backward in time. It's a dizzying ride, almost bewildering at first (all quests are), for Klienman is leaving the security of home and replacing the stability and predictability of continuity in the present for a plunge into experimentation (bagging groceries at Bread and Circus), new departures (deciding to fly to Japan), intense, almost involuntary memories, extended reflection upon them, a search for pattern, and a new willingness to challenge some of his oldest assumptions so that he might effect significant personal readjustment and transformation.

It's such an intense, all-involving process, that Klienman (and his readers) cannot return to the safety of the present until Klienman is ready to apply all that he has experienced and learned in the course of his inward and outward journeys, and that doesn't happen until the final pages of the novel when he boards the plane to return home. Finally, he relives the experience in the cave that has occasioned his whole quest, and then reflects on its new and now positive role in the formation of his character and the new direction in his life.

It's an approach to the *Elderquest* that is most reminiscent of Bergman's use of interactive flashbacks in **Wild Strawberries**, for both posit our memories of the past as both cripplers and enablers, not as fixed determinants of who we are and what we will always be, but as tentative indicators that can be revisited and revised as we grow older and bring more experience and a wider perspective to their interpretation. That's why Bergman has Isak interact with the people from his past as the old man he has become so that we can begin to perceive memory as something open-ended and constantly evolving as we continue to return to it. His alternation of Isak's present-day adventures on his way to Lund with remembered flashbacks and dreams of his past is also the main way in which he indicates that the inward journey into the past is just as crucial and real in an *Elderquest* as is the actual journey in the present.

Here, Canin's refusal to identify the novel's actual present makes the same point that for elderquesters memory can be even more real and have an even greater impact on how we shape our future than can our present activities and behaviors. His dramatization of the recurring patterns in Klienman's memories—the tackling, shoving, moving forward incidents that occur on the football field at Fordham in his youth, in the cave during his young adulthood in World War II, and on the river bank where he pushes Meyer into the water at the height of his business success—also dramatize how we can interpret these key experiences in one way for years, and



can then return to them when we grow older and our needs and desires are changing and interpret them in completely different ways.

Rather than explaining the nature of Klienman's personal transformation and how it has been accomplished, let's turn to the **Questions for Discussion** that can be used to guide our students to their own conclusions.

### Questions for Discussion

Study questions 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 at the back of the book are excellent. Here are some others that are more appropriate for our purposes. There are a lot of them, and most are quite specific and detailed, for this is very definitely a book that needs to be read closely. It more than rewards that kind of attention as do the other books and films as well. As always, bring the questions to class.

1. Canin uses both his title and the name of his hero (August Klienman—distinguished little man) to suggest that this is more than the story of a retired Jewish brewer. Name some other ways in which he suggests that his hero is more heroic than that, that his quest is relevant to us all. What, for example, is the occasion for his visit to his son and his family in New York?
2. Just as Avey Johnson's *Elderquest* has special meaning for African-Americans, so does August Kleinman's have a special meaning for Jewish-Americans. In what ways is his story a particularly Jewish one? How does this Jewish dimension increase the story's relevance?
3. In what ways is Kleinman's quest a specifically masculine one? Have you been through similar struggles of your own or known men who have?
4. Like Bergman's **Wild Strawberries**, **Carry Me Across the Water** takes place entirely in its central character's memory. What does this say about the role of memory in an *Elderquest*?
5. Did you have trouble with Canin's narrative technique? What do you think he gains by jumping from place to place and memory to memory without regard for chronology? Remember, since the story does not unfold chronologically, there must be some other criteria for the ordering of the memories and the decision to allow Klienman to range freely over his past. What kinds of memories does he dwell on and why?
6. As Canin and his interviewer tell us, there are certain recurring kinds of memories, ones that have presumably had a major impact on the kind of person Klienman has been and the kind of life he has led. Name the most important of these recurring memories (hint: there are four of them, at three different stages of his life, and all involve violence). How has he tended to respond to these incidents, positively or negatively? Is there any sign that he has begun to change his attitude toward them? Why do you suppose this is so?
7. Who has told Klienman that he should take the advice of no one? Why? Do you agree? He has certainly spent most of his life putting this principle into action and it has made him a successful brewer and multi-millionaire. What, if any, are the signs that his faith in this principle is beginning to waiver? Why?

8. Describe Klienman's feelings when he tackles the Fordham football player? Have you ever felt this sensation after performing a violent act? When? Have you ever known anyone who has? Do only men have such feelings?
9. What role has fear played in Klienman's life? Is it connected with violence? If so, how? In World War II, he discovers that fear can be transformed into rage. Is this good or bad? Have you ever done it? Again, is this solely a male thing?
10. What keeps Klienman moving forward in the cave? Does fear have anything to do with it? How?
11. In a discussion of religion with his daughter-in-law Claudine (she is a convert to Judaism), Kleinman thinks to himself that "Religion was a drama staged by the fearful." Later in the book, he says that "It's not a question of religion. It's a question of respect." What has made him skeptical of religion? Does this attitude change?
12. When he arrives in Japan, Klienman is asked for the purpose of his visit and proffers several different responses—pleasure no duty, freedom no obligation, justice no recompense. Finally he settles on directed pleasure. Which of these is most accurate? Does he really know at this stage? What has prompted his trip? When?
13. Why does he kill the Japanese officer in the cave? Would you have done the same? What is the Japanese officer hoping he will do and why? What does he take with him when he leaves? What does he do with these things? Why and for how long?
14. Why and when does he finally decide to have the officer's letters translated? What does he do with the translations? When and why does he finally decide to take them with him on his trip to Japan?
15. Does he know what the officer's family will do when he meets them? Does he know how he will respond?
16. Before his departure, he realizes "that he has never truly imagined his children's lives." Later, in Japan, before he meets with the officer's descendants, he muses that life is "the enduring journey of children." What does his encounter with the officer's son tell him about children and his obligations to them? Do you think that this new realization will alter his relationship with Jimmy, Claudine, and Asher?
17. Reread the book's final episode (pp. 199-206). Is this a satisfying ending? Does it suggest that he has successfully completed his *Elderquest*? If so, how and why? He says among other things that he "once more read the Kaddish" (Jewish prayers for the dead), and it failed him. Does this mean that he has not had a religious or at least a spiritual awakening? He feels in the extremely moving final paragraph that he is being lifted, and not just by the plane, that "there is in his chest the lightness of escape." What other feeling in his chest has this replaced? (See the top of page 16.) At what other times in his life has he felt this lightness? Has it been for the same reason? Of course not, so what is the significance of this similarity?

## Part Four

### Critiquing the *Elderquest*

***Note: Please remember to hand these out, the course evaluation at the last class, and the Critiquing the Elderquest at the seventh, next to last class.***

We have provided two evaluation instruments in Handout Seven because we want you to evaluate the course and then to evaluate the *elderquest* as a concept as well. The course evaluation is somewhat traditional in that it begins with seven questions that ask students to evaluate the program and its parts numerically—one (poor) to 5(excellent). But this quantifiable data is followed by a series of open ended questions and a chance to comment further on the seven categories evaluated numerically. In other words, this may take some time and thought to fill out. We strongly recommend that you hand out this form at the beginning of the final class and give students at least ten minutes of class time to fill it out.

The second evaluation, **Critiquing the Elderquest and Charting Your Own** is open ended, and it requires even more time and thought. Its first question also gives those who are unwilling to go into that detail, a chance to decline. But experience has shown us that most do respond to the elderquest and its relevance to their own aging by filling this out quite seriously and often providing us with their own elderquests as well. It is crucial however that this form be handed out at the seventh or next to last class so that students will have the time to take it home, as a kind of final assignment, and then bring it to the last class.

We are especially interested in the results of these two evaluations and hope you will share your results with us.

**Handout Seven:**

**The *Elderquest* in Today's Movies and Novels  
Course Evaluation**

1. On a scale of 1-5 with 5=excellent, 4= very good, 3= good, 2= fair, 1= poor, please rate the following:

The program as a whole	_____
The concept of the Elderquest	_____
The Study Guide	_____
The other online components	_____
The facilitator(s)	_____
The films	_____
The novels	_____
The discussions	_____

(If you would like to comment further on any of the above, please do so on the back of this sheet.)

2. What did you like best about the program?

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3. What would you like to see changed, added, removed, or improved?

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4. Has the program altered your attitude toward aging? How?

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5. Has the program altered your attitude toward movies, novels, and their relevance to your own experience? How?

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6. We hope to renew our NEH grant and offer one of the following programs next time—The Cinema and Literature of Age Part II: Aging and Gender in Today's Movies and Novels or The Cinema and Literature of Age: Part III: The Changing Relationship between the Young and the Old in Today's Movies and Novels. Would you enroll in these programs? If so, which would you prefer?

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**Comments:**

The Program as a whole:

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The concept of the Elderquest

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The Study Guide

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The forums and the rest of the online component

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The facilitator(s)

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The films

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The novels

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The discussions

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The handouts

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*Thank you*

## Critiquing the *Elderquest* and Charting Your Own

This assignment, voluntary though much recommended, has been designed by the developers of the **The *Elderquest* in Today's Movies and Novels** to help them assess the relevance and validity of the ideas proposed and discussed in the program.

It consists of two parts—your answers to a few questions and a few words about your own *Elderquest*—and both assignments are to be handed in at the end of the last class. All responses will be held in the strictest confidence, and our sole goal is to sample national opinion on the usefulness and desirability of the *Elderquest* as an alternative narrative for today's aging.

### Part One:

1. Did our discussions of these films and novels and the materials in the *Study Guide* provide you with a real sense of what an *Elderquest* is and why it might prove to be appropriate and timely as an alternative narrative for today's aging, including your own?

Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_

(If your answer is no, you needn't go further)

2. Is the *Elderquest* an appropriate aging narrative for both men and women?

If not, why not?

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3. Can you imagine the *Elderquest* replacing the dominant narrative of aging as the end of development and the onset of decline? If so, when? If not, why not?

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### Part Two:

Using **Handout Six: The Essential Components of the *Elderquest*** as a guide, use the other side of this sheet to tell us of your own *Elderquest* and the extent to which this course has affected it, prompted it, confirmed it, etc.

## The *Elderquest* and its impact on my own narrative of aging:

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[illegible]

**Please remember to give this to your facilitator at the end of the last class.**

## Part Five: For Further Study (and Enjoyment)

### A. *The Rest of the Story: The Cinema and Literature of Age*

#### 1. Films about Aging and the Second Half of Life

##### A Comprehensive, Annotated Filmography

Nearly all of these highly recommended films are available on video or DVD, though some are harder to find than others. All are excellent for evoking instant and heartfelt discussion about the surprises and discoveries, losses and consolations of aging. We add to this list all the time and welcome suggestions for other titles to include—both feature films and documentaries. Eventually, we will develop study guides for individual films, making it easier to use them in workshops and courses on the various aspects of aging in film.

Many thanks to the Film Library at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Center on Aging, whose "Classic Films on Aging" provided us with many of the titles on this list.

We also thank The Film/Video and Medicine Database at the New York University School of Medicine, online at [www.endeavor.med.nyu.edu](http://www.endeavor.med.nyu.edu). Their film list is shorter, but they are the primary online resource for connections between the humanities and medicine.

Robert E. Yahnke's more specialized list *Intergenerational Relationships in Feature-Length Films: 1970-1995* is also an excellent resource, and I am indebted to it for several of the titles below. It can be found online at [www.gen.umn.edu/faculty\\_staff/yahnke/aging/intergen.htm](http://www.gen.umn.edu/faculty_staff/yahnke/aging/intergen.htm)

Charles A. Nicholas  
16 Jersey Lane  
Manchester-by-the-Sea, MA 01944  
E-Mail: [chucknicholas@juno.com](mailto:chucknicholas@juno.com)

Last updated 04/6/07 (200 titles)

**About Schmidt.** Jack Nicholson and Kathy Bates. Directed by Alexander Payne, 2002. Nicholson is Warren Schmidt, a clueless 65-year-old retired insurance executive from Omaha who sets out on an hilarious but doomed *Elderquest* in the huge camper his recently deceased wife had bought for traveling in their golden years. But he is so shut down emotionally, that his encounters with his daughter, her fiancé, and his mother (Kathy Bates) all end badly. Based on the novel by Louis Begley that is totally different—not an *Elderquest* and about a successful, upper-crust insurance executive from New York City. Color, 124 mins.

**Adam's Rib.** Inna Churikova, Svetlana Ryabova, Maria Golubkina, 1992. Directed by Vyacheslav Krishtofovich. Russia's "new" cinema gives us this touching and bittersweet story of three generations of women living in an overcrowded apartment. The eldest woman is a mute, bedridden grandmother who rings a bell attached to the wall over her bed whenever she wants attention. The whole family gathers in the apartment to celebrate the grandmother's 80th birthday, with totally unanticipated results. In Russian with easy-to-read English subtitles. Color, 77 mins.



**The African Queen.** Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn. Directed by John Huston, 1961. Classic adventure with hard drinking old steamboat captain Bogart rescuing and wooing Hepburn from the Nazis in WWII Africa. They make it downriver barely, by helping each other, and then blow up a Nazi gunboat on Lake Victoria for good measure. A classic. Color, 105 mins.

**After the Rehearsal.** Made for TV drama by Ingmar Bergman with Erland Josephson, Ingrid Thulin, and Lena Olin. Two actresses, one old, one young, challenge their director about how he uses them. Color. 72 mins.

**Age Isn't Everything.** Jonathan Silverman, Rita Moreno, Paul Sorvino. 1991. The cast is excellent and the idea is a good one—a twenty-something gives up his dreams and immediately begins to age (internally); he even assumes his grandparents' Yiddish accent—but this comedy simply isn't funny, it's full of stereotypes about aging, and its message somehow gets lost along the way. Color, 91mins.

**Age Old Friends.** Hume Cronyn, Vincent Gardenia, Esther Rolle, 1989. Based on the play, "A Month of Sundays," by Bob Larbey. When his wife dies, John (Cronyn) moves to a retirement home instead of moving in with his married daughter (played by Cronyn's daughter, Tandy). There he fights against "growing old" by honing a sarcastic wit, flirting, and visiting with his best friend, Michael. The strength and obligations of friendship are tested when Michael's memory starts to slip. Color, 89 mins.

**Alberta Hunter: My Castle's Rockin.'** Documentary narrated by Billy Taylor, 1992. An award-winning concert film focuses on the "come-back" concert at the age of 84 of blues singer Alberta Hunter. The concert ends a 20-year hiatus in which Hunter, one of the most famous female black singers from the 1920s to the 1940s, dropped out of music to work as a nurse. Interspersed with interviews with Hunter and others in her 85th year and an interview with her shortly before her death at 89. If you don't believe an 84-year-old woman can be sensual, you have to watch this one. Color, 60 mins.

**L'America.** Enrico Lo Verso and Michele Placido. Joint Italian/Albanian production, 1996. It's 1991 in post-communist Albania. Chaos rules, and Gino is part of an Italian plot to exploit the Albanians yet again by setting up a dummy corporation with Spiro/Michele, a seventy-year-old survivor, as its phony CEO. Spiro, originally silent, turns out to be an Italian soldier caught in Albania after the Italian Fascists fell to the Communists in 1945, and he's been in prison ever since. His mind has refused to accept the passage of time and the dashing of hopes, and as he and Gino, an intergenerational duo if there ever was one, spend more time together, the old man's naiveté infuriates then depresses the younger man who is both shedding his cynical core and not quite capable of adopting the literally blind hope of his companion. As the film ends, they are both on the same ship full of Albanian refugees en route to Italy, but Spiro thinks they are on the way to America—as do the rest of the desperate Albanian refugees. An ironic commentary on the deathlessness of hope. Color, 112 mins.

**American Patchwork: Dreams and Songs of the Noble Old.** Documentary, 1991. Folklorist Alan Lomax records the songs and memories of elderly southern musicians and their role in preserving America's musical heritage. Color, 60 mins.

**The Angel Levine.** Zero Mostel, Harry Belafonte, Eli Wallach. 1970. This gentle fable based on a story by Bernard Malamud has Mostel, an aging poor New York Jew helped through his troubles by the angel Levine, a Jewish Harry Belafonte. Color, 95 mins.

**Anna.** Czech variation on **All About Eve**. 1987. Sally Kirkland as an aging Czech film star trying to survive in New York on commercials and Paulina Porizkova as the young actress who eventually rockets to stardom. Color, 105 mins.

**Antonia's Line.** Jacob Beks, El Dottermans, Mile Seghers, and Willeke Van Ammelrooy, 1995. Directed by Marleen Gorris, this Dutch film won the Academy award for best foreign film. A feminist fantasy that embraces men. Antonia, a World War II survivor, founds a matriarchal utopian community where she and others of both sexes live, love, and eventually die—encountering, surviving, and occasionally transcending most of life's travails, including aging. Color, 102 mins.

**Any Number Can Win.** (Melodie en Sous-sol) Jean Gabin and Alain Delon. France, 1963. This brooding but tense crime thriller stars Gabin as the aging gangster who wants to make one last score before he retires, and hires the Younger Delon whom he has met in prison. Black and White, French w/ English subtitles. 118 mins.

**Around the Bend.** Directed and written by Jordan Roberts. Michael Caine, Christopher Walken, Josh Lucas, 2004. Four generations of men gather for the first time in years, Caine, the great grandfather dies, but not before he sets the next three generations on the road—to scatter his ashes at selected KFCs in the southwest and to heal a family secret that has been tearing them apart. Wildly original and extremely moving. Walken steals the show as the grandfather whose “transgression” is uncovered and then forgiven in a bittersweet ending that transforms them all. Color, 85. mins.

**As Time Goes By.** Judy Dench and Geoffrey Palmer as the Hardcastles, an aging couple who hit it off this time after failing to do so in their youth. This BBC series ran from 1992-2005 (sixty-seven thirty minute episodes) and may be the greatest sit-com of all time. Good for the tensions and intimacies between the two, but a bit sentimental at times.

**As Young as You Feel.** Monty Woolley, Thelma Ritter, Constance Bennett, and Marilyn Monroe, 1951. Directed by Harmon Jones. When a gentleman is forced by company policy to retire at age 65, he dyes his hair black and, posing as the president of his former company, changes the policies that led to his dismissal. Based on a story by Paddy Chayefsky. Black and white, 77 mins.

**Atlantic City.** Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, and Kate Reid. 1980. This wonderfully wry and real bittersweet comedy by Louis Malle chronicles the decline of Lou (Burt Lancaster) and the Atlantic City he once knew. He's still running the numbers as the casinos go up, protecting his aging and impossible ex-beauty queen Grace (Kate Reid) and lusting after young Sally (Susan Sarandon) whom he watches nightly as she rubs herself with lemons to get rid of the fish smell from her oyster bar casino job—she's studying to be a dealer. They both get mixed up in a botched drug job. Burt revives his macho image of himself, if briefly, liberates Susan, and returns to Grace both literally and figuratively, not exactly reconstructed but certainly better and more honest than he was before. Color, 104 mins.

**Autumn Spring.** Vlastimil Brodsky, 2001. An extremely droll Czech comedy about a 75-year-old dead-pan prankster who constantly irritates his most practical wife by stealing the money she has been saving for their funerals and spending it on quixotic scams and romantic gestures along with his even older but just as mischievous friend. They pose as millionaires and blind men, give

away, waste, and lose their money, but manage to stay young. Eventually the wife gives up and joins her husband in his pranks and they stay happy and alive together. Color, 95 mins, Czech with English subtitles.

**Autumn Sun.** 1998. Spanish with subtitles. Aging Buenos Aires accountant (Norma Aleandro) attracts an older non-Jewish widower (Federico Luppi) through a personal ad, and he agrees to take Jewish lessons to fool her visiting brother. Not a comedy; it's about expanding your horizons and taking chances, even in love, in later life. Color, 103 mins.

**Babette's Feast.** Stephane Audran, Birgitte Federspiel, Bibi Anderson, 1987. Directed by Gabriel Axel. Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards. Isak Dinesen's tale of Babette, a superb French chef living an anonymous life among a pious congregation on a desolate coast in Denmark. Upon winning some money, Babette decides to spend it all on one magnificent meal for the elderly sisters she works for and the simple villagers who had taken her in many years earlier. For the Danes, however, food has always consisted primarily of boiled codfish and ale-bread soup, and there is something sinful about the lavish fare Babette sets before them. But only for a while... Danish and French with English subtitles. Color, 102 mins.

**The Ballad of Narayama.** Ken Ogata, Sumiko Sakamoto, and Tonpei Hidari, 1983 (Japanese, with very easy to read subtitles). Directed and written by Shohei Imamura. In the early 1800s, a remote mountain village is constantly threatened with starvation. To survive, a number of ruthless laws and customs were established. One of these was the obligation placed upon sons to carry their aged parents to the mountain top of Narayama and leave them there to die. Full of images of nature and rural Japanese life, this film adds a strange beauty to what could be a very depressing tale. Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival. Color, 129 mins.

**The Barbarian Invasions.** 2003. In this Oscar-winning drama, fifty-ish Remy (Remy Girard) is divorced and hospitalized in Montreal. His ex-wife, Louise, asks their estranged son, Sebastien, to come home from London (where he now lives) as a show of support for his father. As soon as he arrives, Sebastien makes the impossible happen, using his contacts and disrupting the health care system in every way possible. The sequel to Denys Arcand's **Decline of the American Empire** and an extraordinarily honest and intelligent story about making the most of one's final days. Color, 110 mins.

**Batteries Not Included.** Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy, 1987. Directed by Stephen Spielberg. When an unscrupulous real estate developer sends thugs into a tenement to get rid of the last five tenants, the tenants' fortunes improve when they are helped by tiny visitors from outer space who are lost in the big city. No high art here, but the feistiness of the couple played by Cronyn and Tandy is nevertheless worth watching. And the aliens are sort of cute. Color, 107 mins.

**Best Boy.** Documentary, 1979. This Academy award-winner directed by Ira Wohl dramatizes the real-life story of aging parents trying to cope with their over-50 retarded son, Philly. Ira, who is Philly's cousin, is able to talk the parents into letting Philly become a part of the larger community so that he can move out before they are too old to care for him. Color, 105 mins.

**Il Bidone (The Swindle).** Broderick Crawford, Richard Basehart, Franco Fabrizzi, 1955. Directed by Fellini. This early Fellini features an aging (if you consider 48 aging) con man (Il Bidone) Crawford who hangs out with two other petty criminals—Picasso (Basehart) and Roberto Fabrizzi, who is a mindless thief and sycophant. Broken and depressed, a bad father as well as a small-time criminal, Crawford tries one more swindle to give his estranged daughter the money for her education, but is caught trying to con his associates and is beaten to death.

Powerful but dated story of the failed, unable to transform himself, macho man. Black and white. In Italian with subtitles. 91 mins.

**The Boynton Beach Club.** 2005. Dyan Cannon, Sally Kellerman, Joseph Bologna. Directed by Susan Seidelman whose mother lives in the real Florida “active retirement” community and wrote the first draft of the screenplay. Romantic comedy featuring numerous members of a “bereavement club” who are trying hilariously, disastrously, and then movingly and more successfully to resurrect their love and sex lives. Seems condescending and sit com like at first, but this is one of the first Hollywood movies to treat dating in old age seriously, and it is worth a viewing. Color, 105 mins.

**Brain Candy.** Kevin McDonald, Scott Thompson, Mark McKinney, and Dave Foley, 1996. This outrageous farce pokes fun at a drug industry that has developed a new “brain candy” called Gleemonex that makes its users, including an elderly woman and her researcher, happy but eventually comatose. Color, 89 mins.

**Broken Flowers.** 2005. Directed by Jim Jarmusch and starring Bill Murray. Brilliantly droll comic satire about an aging lothario, who is told that he may have a 19-year-old son, so he sets off across the country to confront all the old flames who might be the mother. Makes a most interesting companion piece to **About Schmidt**. Murray’s misguided *Elderquest* is no more successful than Jack Nicholson’s, but his may have even more to say about the isolation and immaturity of the aging American male. There may also be a pathetic ray of hope at the end of this one. Color, 105 mins.

**Bubba Ho-Tep.** 2003. Elvis Presley wannabe (Bruce Campbell) is an elderly resident in an East Texas rest home; he switched identities with an impersonator years before his “death” and then missed his chance to switch back. The King teams up with Jack (Ossie Davis), a fellow nursing home resident who thinks he’s John F. Kennedy, and the two old codgers prepare to battle an evil Egyptian entity that’s chosen their long-term care facility as its happy hunting grounds. Color, 96 mins.

**The Buena Vista Social Club.** 1999. Ruben Gonzales, Ibrahim Ferrer, Ry and Joachim Cooder, Manuel Galban, Barbarito Torres, Cachaito Lopez, Omara Portuondo, et al. Directed by Wim Wenders and produced by Ry Cooder. In this inspirational documentary, a group of nearly forgotten Cuban *Son* players and singers, most in their sixties and seventies, are brought together by Cooder to resurrect their traditional and very romantic music and with it their lives. The movie chronicles their battered Havana neighborhood and their battered but not broken spirits as they rehearse, perform, and eventually take the world by storm. The final sequence in New York as they walk the streets before and after their triumphant Carnegie Hall Concert is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and its capacity for joy, whatever the age or whatever the odds. Color, 97 mins.

**Calendar Girls.** 2003. Helen Mirren, Julie Walters, directed by Nigel Cole. The members of the Rylstone Women’s Institute of North Yorkshire are resilient, resourceful, and refined. They’re also about to shock the residents of this little English town. When one of their own discovers her husband has cancer and needs treatment that the couple can’t afford, the group decides to put out their yearly calendar to raise money. But instead of the usual Yorkshire dales, they’ll be gracing the pages in the nude. Color, 100 mins.

**The Cemetary Club.** 1993. Ellen Burstyn, Olympia Dukakis, and Diane Ladd play three Jewish widows in their fifties who meet regularly at the graves of their husbands and argue about what

should come next in their lives. For one, it turns out to be Danny Aiello, in this funny but sometimes insightful journey into love in later life. Color. 102 mins.

**Central Station.** Fernanda Montenegro and Vinicius de Oliveira, 1998. (Portuguese with excellent subtitles). This Brazilian masterpiece may be the best intergenerational film ever made. It is also an excellent example of an *Elderquest*, a middle passage, desperately needed and successfully completed. Donã Dora, old, angry, and totally hopeless, writes letters for the young and still hopeful in Rio's Central Station, then throws them away. But she is gradually and against her will drawn into the life of 10-year-old Josue whose mother writes a letter trying to reunite him with his father and is then run over by a bus. Dora is slow to re-humanize and Josue is equally slow to let down his barriers and begin once again to hope, but they embark on an endless odyssey in search of both of their lost fathers, and eventually the letter writer rewrites her own script as well as the boy's. Heartbreaking; realistic, and finally revelatory story of how the life review can give us the power to redefine not only our own lives, but those of our descendants as well. Color, 106 mins.

**Children of Nature.** Gisli Haldorsson, Sigridur Hagalin, Bruno Ganz, 1991. This powerful Icelandic film was nominated for an Academy award in 1992 and tells the story of a 78-year-old who unwillingly enters a nursing home only to meet an equally unhappy 79-year-old woman from his native village far to the north. They steal a jeep, drive, elude capture, and then walk to the village where they grew up in this beautiful, nearly silent, and darkly humorous tale of life, love, magic, and death. Color, 85 mins.

**Chimes at Midnight.** 1967. Classic tragedy of Falstaff drawn from five different Shakespeare plays by Orson Welles. Flawed because of a low budget, but a brilliant characterization of the aging fat man nonetheless. Black and white, 115 mins.

**Cinema Paradiso.** Phillipe Noiret, 1988. The French Noiret gives a masterful performance as an aging projectionist in small town post-WWII Italy in this autobiographical memoir by director Giuseppe Tornatore. A fine study of intergenerational relationships as the elder Noiret serves as a father figure for the young boy who has lost his real father in the war. Only in middle age does the younger character recognize the full import of the nurturing relationship. Color, 123 mins.

**Cocoon.** Don Ameche, Wilford Brimley, Hume Cronyn, Brian Dennehy, Maureen Stapleton, Jessica Tandy, Gwen Verdon, 1985. Directed by Ron Howard. A group of senior citizens, relegated to an old age home in Florida, are given a second chance at being young. Color, 117 mins.

**Collected Stories.** 1997. PBS version of a two-character play by Donald Margulies. New York writer and teacher in her mid-50s (Linda Levin) hires an ambitious grad student (Samantha Mathis) as an assistant who then betrays her when she turns the details of her scandalous life into a best selling novel. Color, 120 mins.

**Crimes and Misdemeanors.** Alan Alda, Woody Allen, Claire Bloom, Mia Farrow, Martin Landau, Angelica Huston, Sam Waterson, 1989. Compelling Allen comedy/drama that features several older characters and how they learn and teach. Color, 104 mins.

**Dad.** Jack Lemmon, Ted Danson, Olympia Dukakis, and Ethan Hawke, 1990. Based on the novel by William Wharton. A work-obsessed stockbroker (Danson) flies home when his mother is unexpectedly hospitalized. He is shocked to see how his father (Lemmon), whom he hasn't seen

in over two years, has deteriorated. With careful nurturing, John revitalizes his father and reestablishes a relationship with him. Some pop psychology and a bit hokey, but saved by some fine acting. Color, 117 mins.

**Daddy Nostalgia** . Dirk Bogarde & Jane Birkin, Directed by Bertrand Tavernier. France, 1990. An adult daughter leaves Paris for the Riviera to visit the dying father with whom she has never been close. Eventually she has to return to Paris and work and the father dies shortly thereafter, but in the meanwhile the two finally come to respect, understand, and even love each other in a series of quietly moving encounters. Color. 105 mins.

**Daughters of the Dust**. Cora Lee Day and Alva Rogers, 1992. Directed by Julie Dash, this visually lush, poetic film features a wise old matriarch and conjure woman and lovingly portrays the African-American Gullah subculture that once flourished on the barrier islands off South Carolina and Georgia. Set on the day the clan must leave the island and its paradise behind, the film celebrates the solidarity and innocence of these island people, including the way in which they respect their elders and the oral tradition. Color, 113 mins.

**Death in Venice**. 1971. Visconti's lush and decadent version of Thomas Mann's novella with Dirk Bogarde as Aschenbach. Aging and obsessed, he stalks a dissolute Italian youth trying desperately to feel. Haunting and extremely sad. Color, 124 mins.

**Death of a Salesman**. 1986. Dustin Hoffman as Willy and John Malkovich as Biff in this moving adaptation of Arthur Miller's play about a salesman too old to sustain his youthful delusions and not wise enough to abandon or replace them. It brings home the fact that the play is about the macho male's inability to accept aging and its changes. Color, 135 mins.

**Deconstructing Harry**. Woody Allen and a huge cast of regulars including Billy Crystal as Satan. 1997. This hilarious parody of *Wild Strawberries* has Allen unable to find people to accompany him on the way to be honored for his life's work so he hires a hooker, kidnaps his son from his ex-wife, and brings along a sick friend who dies on the way. Full of flashbacks with real and fictional characters. Ends with its rotten author unable to make sense of his life but comforted by Satan for his art. Color, 96 mins.

**The Devil and Miss Jones**. 1941. (The title has nothing to do with the film.) Charles Coburn, Jean Arthur, Bob Cummings, Edmund Gwen, Spring Byington. Directed by Sam Wood. Coburn doesn't get top billing (he never did) but he is actually the star of this romantic comedy/*Elderquest*. The earliest of Hollywood's aging stars, Coburn made his first movie in his early sixties and made over 70 before his retirement at 82. Here he is a dour millionaire owner of a department store who goes undercover to find out why everyone hates him, only to be completely transformed and even get the girl. Black and white, 90 mins.

**The Dresser**. Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay, 1983. Directed by Peter Yates and based on the play by Ronald Harwood. Marvelously acted show biz story of a WWII aging Shakespearean actor and his younger, devoted dresser. It's a complex but strangely loving relationship, and the dresser is devastated at film's end by the sudden death of the actor. Color, 119 mins.

**Dim Sum**. Lauren Chew, Kim Chew (mother and daughter), Victor Wong, 1987 (in English and Cantonese with English subtitles). Directed by Wayne Wang. A Chinese-American family in contemporary San Francisco tries to maintain a link with their cultural heritage while confronting the changing world around them. Color, 88 mins.

**Driving Miss Daisy**, Morgan Freeman, Jessica Tandy, Dan Aykroyd, 1988. Directed by Bruce Beresford. Academy Awards: Best Picture; Best Actress (Tandy). A headstrong Southern lady and her patient chauffeur spend their years together building a deep friendship. Color, 99 mins.

**An Empty Bed**. 1990. Devastating drama about an aging homosexual's obsession with his physical decline and his inability to adapt. John Wylie. Color, 60 mins.

**The Entertainer**. 1960. Olivier as Archie Rice in Tony Richardson's version of John Osborne's play about an aging, third-rate vaudevillian and his growing awareness of how self-destructive his whole life has been. Black and white, 104 mins.

**Eternity and a Day**. Bruno Ganz and Achilleas Skevis, 1998. Directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Greek with English subtitles. Poetic, complex study of Alexandre, an old poet diagnosed with terminal cancer, who spends his last free day before checking into the hospital searching for meaning and strength by befriending an unnamed Albanian boy. Their adventures together are reminiscent of **Wild Strawberries**, and in the end the young boy's night journey reinvigorates the old man's creative vitality and helps him to prepare for his final journey. Color, 112 mins.

**Everybody's Fine**. Marcello Mastroianni, 1992 (Italian, with English subtitles). A retired and widowed Sicilian bureaucrat decides to pay a surprise visit to his children who live in all the great cities of Italy, have been telling Dad of their successes, but are really quite ordinary and miserable—one son has even committed suicide. Afraid of Dad's disappointment, they've been living lies and proclaiming along with him that "Everybody's fine." Unfortunately, when Dad does discover the truth, he can't handle it. Uneven, pretentious film, with some good moments, but marred by its failure to decide what it's about, whose to blame, etc. An interesting contrast to **Tokyo Story** (see below). Color, 115 mins.

**A Family Upside Down**. Helen Hayes, Fred Astaire, Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., Patty Duke Astin, 1978. Directed by David Lowell Rich. The peaceful life of an older couple is disrupted when the husband suffers a series of heart attacks. After a serious attack, he is placed in a nursing home. Unhappy and lonely, he leaves against the wishes of his doctor and his children to rejoin his wife. Color, 99 mins.

**The Field**. Richard Harris, Tom Berenger, and John Hurt, 1990. Directed by Jim Sheridan. An iron-willed peasant fights to retain a patch of land in Ireland that he's tended all his life. His uncompromising stand divides the community in an allegory of Ireland's internal conflicts. Color, 113 mins.

**Foxfire**. 1987. Jessica Tandy as Arnie Nations, an aging widow who has lived her entire life in the Blue Ridge Mountains and must choose, under pressure from her children, whether to continue to stay and live in the past, communing daily with her dead husband. or change and come down from the mountain to live with her kin. Color, 118 mins.

**Fried Green Tomatoes**. Mary Stuart Masterson, Mary-Louise Parker, Kathy Bates, Jessica Tandy, 1991. Directed by Jon Avnet, from the book by Fannie Flagg. A chance encounter in a nursing home between a dowdy housewife and a spry octogenarian leads to an unexpected friendship and an absorbing story of two women who lived a half century earlier in the town of Whistle Stop. Color, 130 mins.

**The Gin Game.** Jessica Tandy, Hume Cronyn, 1984. Taped from the London production of the award winning Broadway play directed by Mike Nichols. A powerful and savage portrait of two strangers who meet in a nursing home, play gin, and flirt with romance and one last chance to escape themselves and their bitter, desperate isolation. Unfortunately they fail, but, in the process, they reveal to us that successful aging is possible even if they are unable to achieve it. Color, 77 mins.

**Ginger and Fred.** Giulietta Masina and Marcello Mastroianni, 1986. Directed by Federico Fellini. Hilarious and bittersweet story of Italian Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire imitators who are reunited after 30 years by a super-tacky, Felliniesque TV show that brings back old performers of every description and then challenges them either to make fools of themselves or somehow recapture the old magic. Ginger and Fred make it, magically, and Mastroianni's drunken, aged dancer is a joy and terror to behold, but the magic is fleeting, and they part once again, still incompatible. In Italian with English subtitles. Color, 126 minutes.

**The Girl from Paris.** Mathilde Seigner and Michel Serrault, 2001. Young girl lives out dream of becoming farmer in French Alpine region, buys farm and shares it with its old owner, a grumpy widower. Strange winter-spring relationship develops between them, and the film ends before it is clarified, although it continues. Color, 143 minutes.

**Going in Style.** George Burns, Art Carney, Lee Strasberg, 1979. Directed by Martin Brest. Stylish, sophisticated comedy. Three kindly old men decide to light up the twilight of their lives in a blaze of glory by robbing a bank. Color, 91 mins.

**The Good Thief.** 2002. A glitzy Hollywood remake of Jean Pierre Melville's 1955 French classic, **Bob Le Flambeur**, with Nick Nolte as Bob, the aging gambler who wants to pull off one final caper, the robbery of a big Riviera casino. Along the way, he nearly loses big, saves the 17 year old Anne from prostitution, claims for most of the film that he is too old for her, but eventually, after he wins even bigger than he had imagined, they walk off together. Much more sophomoric in its depiction of the aging male than its French counterpart. Color. 108 mins.

**Goodbye Mr. Chips.** 1939. Made three times, this original version with Robert Donat is still the best. Shy British public school teacher spends his whole life teaching Latin to young boys after he tragically loses his wife in their youth. Black and white, 89 mins.

**The Grandfather.** 1999. Cristina Cruz, Maria Massip, directed by Jose Luis Garci. On learning that his son has died, an elderly Spanish man (Fernando Fernan-Gomez) returns home from California, having failed to strike it rich during the Gold Rush. Back in his native land, the man finds himself embroiled in a mystery when he learns that his now-deceased son fathered only one of the two "daughters" he left behind; now the old man must find out which one. The film received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. Color, 130 mins.

**A Great Day in Harlem.** Documentary, 1995. In 1958, a young art director conceived the idea of a picture of "everyone" in the New York jazz world. At 10:00 a.m. one Sunday morning, nearly "everyone" made it to the uptown location. This film is made from home movie footage of that morning's activities, interspersed by recent interviews, 35 years later, with some of the surviving participants (a couple of whom have since died, leaving this as their last interview). Not just for jazz buffs, but a little knowledge of who's who helps. Black and white and color, 60 mins.

**The Grey Fox.** Richard Farnsworth, 1983. Based on the true story of Bill Miner, Canada's celebrated gentleman-outlaw, this lovely elegiac tale chronicles his aging and the passing of the



19<sup>th</sup> century West Color, 92 mins.

**Grumpy Old Men.** Jack Lemmon, Walter Matthau, Ann-Margret, 1993. Directed by Donald Petrie. Next-door neighbors John and Max are a pair of curmudgeons with a long-running feud associated with romantic rivalry almost a half-century earlier. When an attractive widow moves across the street, the old competition starts all over again. Color, 104 mins.

**Harold and Maude.** Ruth Gordon and Bud Cort, 1971. Musical score by Cat Stevens. A classic cult film that features an unlikely romantic pair—a young man bored with life and in love with death; and a soon-to-be 80-year-old hippie who is so in love with life and good at it that she restores the young man's zest for living. They apparently become lovers, but just before they are to be married she fulfils a promise to kill herself on her 80th birthday. He mourns briefly, but dances on with his life, restored. A nice if hackneyed message spoiled by the suggestion that 80 is as long as anyone ought to live without becoming too much of an embarrassment to the rest of us, that it's best to go out before real decline and dependence set in. Color, 91 mins.

**Harry and Tonto.** Art Carney, Ellen Burstyn, Larry Hagman, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Chief Dan George, 1974. Directed by Paul Mazursky. Academy Award: Best Actor (Carney). An energetic septuagenarian takes a cross-country trip (*Elderquest*) with his cat, Tonto, making new friends and visiting old loves. Color, 115 mins.

**Horton Foote's Alone.** 1997. Hume Cronyn as an elderly Texas farmer lost and alone after his wife of 52 years has died. The possibility of oil on his land brings out greed in his children and nephews but no one but his old friend (James Earl Jones) seems interested in Cronyn and what he wants to do. Color, 107 mins.

**The Hours.** 2002. Nicole Kidman, Julianne Moore, directed by Stephen Daldry. This gripping drama features three 20th-century women: the incomparable Virginia Woolf (Nicole Kidman, in an Oscar-winning performance), hard at work on the classic story of Mrs. Dalloway while battling depression in the 1920s; Laura Brown (Julianne Moore), an unsatisfied 1950s housewife who finds solace in Woolf's novel; and Clarissa Vaughn (Meryl Streep), a modern-day book editor who's losing her former lover to AIDS. Color, 124 mins.

**Ikiru.** Takashi Shimura and Nobuo Kaneko, 1952. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Won Golden Laurel at the Berlin Film Festival. A lonely civil servant learns that he is about to die and realizes that he has never really lived. Moving from drunken despair to quiet resolve, he vows to make his final days meaningful. With the help of a co-worker, he starts building a playground in a slum neighborhood. Black and White, 143 mins.

**I'm Going Home.** Michel Piccoli, Catherine Deneuve, John Malkovich. 2000. An elderly distinguished actor suffers the death of his wife, his son, and his daughter-in-law in an auto accident and must return to the theater to help his grandson. He plays Prospero, Shakespeare's aging magician and like him decides that his time is past and exits with dignity. Color, 92 mins.

**I Never Sang for My Father.** Gene Hackman, Melvyn Douglas, Estelle Parsons, Dorothy Stickney, 1970. A moving, thought-provoking adaptation of Robert Anderson's play. Hackman must choose between staying in the East and caring for his cantankerous but well meaning father and moving west to marry the woman he loves. His mother and sister offer contradictory advice. and the conflicting needs of the middle aged and the elderly make for a stirring drama. Color, 90 mins.

**Innocence.** Julia Blake, Bud Tingwell, and Terry Norris. Directed by Paul Cox. 2001. Andreas and Claire, lovers in their twenties, meet fifty years later. He's a widower, but she's still married. They rekindle their love in spite of age, the possibilities of ill health, and the impact on Claire's husband. This September/September affair is honest, affecting, and extremely romantic, a real breakthrough film even though the ending is a bit controversial. Color, 94 mins.

**Iris: A Memoir of Iris Murdoch.** 2001. Kate Winslet, Hugh Bonneville, directed by Richard Eyre. Iris Murdoch was l'enfant terrible of the literary world in early 1950s Britain -- a live wire who thumbed her nose at the conformity of the era via a voracious sex life that included male and female partners. In this snippet of her life, Murdoch (Judi Dench) faces the onset of Alzheimer's disease alongside her adoring husband (Jim Broadbent). Kate Winslet portrays the young, free-spirited Iris in flashbacks. Color, 115 mins.

**Jeanne de Florette.** French with English subtitles. Gerard Depardieu, Yves Montand, Daniel Auteuil, 1987. The first of two films directed by Claude Berri and based on a Marcel Pagnol novel. In this part, the old, deceitful and twisted farmer (Montand) outwits the young, and idealistic city dweller (Gerard Depardieu). In the process, it reveals one of the most devastating portraits of aging gone wrong that has ever been filmed. Montand is relentless, wicked, and apparently indomitable. But the story isn't over (see **Manon of the Spring** below). Color, 122 mins.

**King Lear.** (There are, of course, several video versions of Shakespeare's masterwork on old age, but the most recent is one of the best.) Ian Holm with Barbara Flynn, Amanda Redman, David Lyon and Victoria Hamilton, 1998. Shakespeare's classic drama of a ruler who sows the seeds of his own downfall in his power-hungry children is magnificently staged by England's Royal National Theatre Company. Color, 150 mins., on two tapes.

**The King of Masks.** 1999. Nearing the end of his life, Wang, a locally renowned street performer and wizard of the venerable art of mask magic, yearns to pass on his technique. But custom prescribes that he can only hand down his craft to a male successor. Anxious to preserve his unique art, the heirless Wang buys an impoverished eight-year-old on the black market. When the child divulges a dreaded secret (she's a girl), Wang faces a choice between filial love and societal tradition. Color, 110 mins.

**Kotch.** Walter Matthau, directed by Jack Lemon, 1971. Probably Matthau's best portrait of an aging American male resisting his children's attempts to retire him. Full of marvelous details of the aging process. Lemon's directorial debut. Color, 113 mins.

**Ladies in Lavender.** Australia, 2004. A bittersweet fairy tale, directed by Charles Dance from a short story by William J. Locke and starring Judi Dench and Maggie Smith as two elderly sisters, one a widow and one a virgi, who share a seaside cottage in Cornwall in the 1930's. When a mysterious young foreigner washes ashore, he bewitches them both and Judi Dench (the virgin) falls head over heels in love and lust. Charming, disturbing, and eventually reassuring, it's a tale about late life fantasies and passions. Color, 104 mins.

**The Last Good Time.** Olivia D'Abo and Armin Mueller-Stahl, 1995. Directed by Bob Balaban. Joseph, a 70-something Brooklyn widower, is unexpectedly thrust into the life of his 20-something, downstairs neighbor, the lovely and troubled Charlotte. It has something to do with spousal abuse, a lost key, and thousands in drug money. But the movie is really about old age and passion. Joseph returns to life, there is a very delicately handled love scene, Charlotte learns to

trust again, and then gets on with her life. A most honest and touching version of the May/December romance. Color, 95 mins.

**The Last Laugh.** Emil Jannings, Mary Delshaft, Kurt Hiller, 1924 (German). Directed by F.W. Murnau. With the exception of sound effects and one voice-over, this silent film classic relies on masterful cinematography and skillful acting and directing to tell its story. A pompous old hotel doorman is demoted to washroom attendant because of his age, losing his uniform and his status among his tenement neighbors. However, his fortunes improve due to a strange turn of fate. Black and white, 74 mins.

**The Last Lieutenant.** 1994. Norwegian with English subtitles. Directed by Hans Peter Molland and starring Espen Skjønberg. True story about a recently retired merchant seaman in his 60s who leaves his loving wife, dons an outdated cavalry uniform, and enlists in the army on the eve of the Nazi occupation. The army surrenders, but our last lieutenant refuses to give up and forms and then leads a rag-tag resistance group that holds out as long as possible. More than the story of an old man trying to be young, it is a study of how the elderly would lead if given the chance. Color, 102 mins.

**Last Orders.** Michael Caine, Tom Courtenay, David Hemmings, Bob Hoskins, and Helen Mirren. Based on the novel by Graham Swift, 2001. Jack (Michael Caine) the butcher has just died, and three of his best friends gather in the local pub with his ashes, then set off with his son in a borrowed Mercedes to fling them in the sea at Brighton—Jack's last wish. Along the way they review their lives and loves, remember both Jack and his wife (Mirren) who refuses to go along. They also fight, cry, laugh, and make us love, admire, and pity them all. Color, 109 mins.

**The Late Show.** Art Carney and Lily Tomlin. Directed by Bobby Benton, 1977. A delightful send up of the hard boiled detective genre (especially **The Big Sleep**) featuring Carney as aging private eye Ira Wells with a hearing aid, a bum leg, and a perforated ulcer who finds himself back in the game thanks to Lily Tomlin's loopy ex-hippie Margo, her lost cat, some hilarious hoods, lots of murders, and two damsels in distress. Has some wonderfully real and touching moments and Carney and Tomlin are terrific together as one of film's oddest couples. Color, 93 mins.

**Local Hero.** Peter Riegert, Dennis Lawson, and Burt Lancaster, 1983. An off-beat, lyrical Scottish comedy written and directed by Bill Forsyth. Young Texas oil man Riegert is sent to a sleepy Scottish, seaside village to buy it up cheap, but he is consistently outwitted and eventually pixilated by the crusty old natives. Eventually his aging and equally pixilated boss Burt Lancaster arrives, and the ending is wondrous and charming—a victory for the old, and the traditional. Color, 112 mins.

**Lost for Words.** Dame Thora Hird and Pete Postlethwaite, 1999. This Mobil Masterpiece Theater production is based on a true story by Eric Longden. Thora Hird (88) plays the 87-year-old wacky but loveable mother of Postlethwaite who suffers a number of strokes and eventually dies all but incoherent in a rest home that she mislabels, Spongo. A lovely story of filial devotion and British dottiness: "Shall we bury you or do you want to be cremated, Mom?" "Oh, I don't know, luv, surprise me." Color, 78 mins.

**Love.** Lili Darvas, Mari Torocsik, Ivan Darvas, 1971. Hungarian, with English subtitles. Directed by Karoly Makk. The story of the complex relationship between an aged aristocrat nearing her 100th birthday and her daughter-in-law, as the latter both cares for the old woman and tries to hide from her the fact that her husband, the old woman's favorite son, is in prison on political charges. Black and white, 92 mins.

**Love Among the Ruins.** Katharine Hepburn, Laurence Olivier, 1975 (TV). Directed by George Cukor. An aging beauty is accused of having seduced and abandoned a young man and turns to an old flame—a man she seduced and abandoned 40 years earlier—for legal assistance. Color, 100 mins. (Not currently available.)

**Madadayo.** Hisashi Igawa, Kyoko Kagawa, and Tatsuo Matsumura, 1993. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. This final film by one of the world's great directors explores the aging process from within and from without, as a group of devoted students seeks to honor and console their favorite retired teacher. Set during the 1940s and 1950s, the film shows the old man's decline, their devotion, and the closeness that keeps them together. The title means "No, Not Yet!," and each year at the dinner in his honor, the teacher shouts it to their question of "Is it Time?" When he eventually does die, the students are still with him in the next room, assuming that regretfully it is finally "Time." But the old man's final dream suggests something else. Color, 134 mins.

**Madame Rosa.** Simone Signoret, Samy Ben Youb, and Claude Dauphin, 1977. Academy Award, Best Foreign Film; French with English subtitles. Madame Rosa is an aging Jewish ex-prostitute and Holocaust survivor who earns her living in old age by raising other prostitutes' children. Her love for an Arab boy who has been abandoned to her care renews her spirit in this strange and haunting story. Color, 104 mins.

**Madame Sousatska.** Shirley MacLaine, Peggy Ashcroft, Navin Chowdhry, 1988. Directed by John Schlesinger. An aging, eccentric piano teacher in London takes on a teenage Bengali immigrant as a pupil. An intergenerational relationship develops and also expands to include an elderly gay man whom the boy Manek also befriends. Color, 113 mins.

**Mama Turns 100 (Mama cumple 100 años).** Geraldine Chaplin, Rafaela Aparicio, and Fernando Fernan Gomez, 1978. Directed by Carlos Saura. An imaginative comedy from Spain's foremost director tells the story of a great matriarch celebrating her centennial and her family's plotting to make sure she doesn't make it to 101. However, Mama is shrewd and she has the help of the family's former governess in her attempt to foil her scheming relatives. Spanish with English subtitles. Color, 100 mins.

**The Man on the Train.** 2002. Jean Rochefort, Johnny Hallyday, directed by Patrice Leconte. A weathered old gangster (Johnny Hallyday) arrives by train at a small French town to rob the local bank. But he soon discovers there's no room at the local inn in which he'd hoped to stay while he plans his crime. An elderly teacher (Jean Rochefort) invites him to stay in his mansion, and the two men soon discover that they each might have been better suited for the other man's way of life, and in the end they switch. Color, 109 mins.

**Manon of the Spring.** French with English subtitles. Yves Montand, Daniel Auteuil, Emmanuelle Beart, Hippolyte Girardot, 1987. In this Claude Berri directed sequel to **Jean de Florette** (see above), a grown Manon, the daughter of the dead hunchback, wreaks her revenge on the old Yves Montand for his blocking of the spring and the ruin of her father. It's a revenge that brings Montand even lower than she could have imagined. Montand is magnificent as he slowly discovers the errors of his ways, too late to correct them. Color, 113 mins.

**Mr. and Mrs. Bridge.** Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and Blythe Danner, 1991. Directed by James Ivory. Set in the Kansas City of the 1930s and 1940s, Ivory's adaptation of Evan S. Connell's novels (**Mr. Bridge** and **Mrs. Bridge**) painstakingly portrays an upper-middle class

couple struggling to survive within an emotional vacuum as the world changes around them. Color, 127 mins.

**Mr. Peabody and the Mermaid.** William Powell and Ann Blyth, 1948. Arch, outdated, but still charming fantasy about a married middle aged man who hooks and falls in love with a mermaid. Powell is terrific both as he moons over Ann Blyth and as he eventually begins to act his age. Black and white, 89 mins.

**Mrs. Brown.** Judy Dench and Billy Conway, 1997. Intriguing historical drama about love in later life. It's the 1860s and Queen Victoria, in deep seclusion after the death of Prince Albert, is brought back to life by fiery Highlander and personal servant, John Brown. Their relationship continues, much to the anger and consternation of the British establishment, until Victoria returns to an active role in England's affairs and dismisses Brown. But the feelings were deep and real, and she eventually visits him many years later on his death bed. Color, 104 mins.

**Mrs. Dalloway.** Vanessa Redgrave, Rupert Graves, and Natasha McElhone, 1997. Directed by Marleen Goris and based on the novel by Virginia Woolf. Excellent and faithful film adaptation of a single day in the late middle age of Clarissa Dalloway, a prominent socialite and politician's wife who reviews her whole life as she prepares for a party. In the end, she discovers that she has not narrowed her choices or closed off all other approaches to experience but can still appreciate and embody them all. A subplot ending in suicide deepens further our perception of what it means to accept our choices rather than regret them, whether they lead to life or death. Color, 97 mins.

**Monsieur Ibrahim.** 2003. Omar Sharif, Pierre Boulanger, directed by Francois Dupeyron. 1960s Paris serves as the backdrop for Francois Dupeyron's heartwarming drama. Momo (Pierre Boulanger), a teenage orphan, lives in a working-class neighborhood and has very few friends -- save for the kindly local prostitutes, who adore him. Momo soon befriends the older and wiser shopkeeper Ibrahim (Omar Sharif), who soon becomes a father figure for Momo and takes him on a journey of self-discovery that will change both of their lives. Color, 117 mins.

**Monte Walsh.** 2003. Tom Selleck, Isabella Rossellini, directed by Simon Wincer. The dawn of the 20th century saw the death-knell of the traditional cowboy way of life. Ranch hand Monte Walsh (Tom Selleck) is a Wyoming Rambler whose way of life is fast becoming obsolete. What's more, the widening economic gap is leaving behind Monte and his companions, many of whom "ride fence" for rich landowners. Something's got to give! David Carradine and Isabella Rossellini co-star in this elegy to the cowboy and his way of life. Color, 106 mins.

**The Mother.** 2003. Anne Reid, Peter Vaughan, directed by Roger Michell. Anne Reid plays May, a suburban grandmother whose husband dies unexpectedly while visiting their children in London. When May goes there to tend to the tragic matter, she begins to lose her grip on her identity, stripped of her wifely duties and lost in the bustle of a world so foreign to her. Then she meets Darren, a young man who's bedding her daughter, and her life takes a turn for the complicated and sexual, proving that even the aged can make very wrong decisions. Color, 114 mins.

**My Favorite Season.** Catherine Deneuve and Daniel Auteuil. Directed by Andre Techine, 1993. As their aging mother begins to fail, brother and sister fight, make up, review their lives, try to

reconnect to the old woman and find it increasingly difficult. Once she dies, some of their problems seem to be solved but not all of them. Great performances, beautiful cinematography, great backgrounds in Toulouse, and an intense if unresolved intergenerational conflict. French with good yellow subtitles. Color, 122. mins.

**Nelly and Monsieur Arnaud.** Emmanuelle Beart and Michel Serrault, 1995. French with English subtitles. Wonderfully subtle and moving take on the May/December romance, its attractions and its complications. This time it's 25-year-old Nelly who becomes an amanuensis for 60-something retired business man turned writer, Monsieur Arnaud. Both are casualties of the love wars, and each seeks consolation in the other, but the timing is wrong, and they end up parting without really knowing whether it was real and/or practical or not. Color, 105 mins.

**Nobody's Fool.** Paul Newman, Jessica Tandy, and Melanie Griffith, 1994. Sully (Newman), a likeable but unreliable blue-collar worker who's made a lifetime of bad decisions, has the chance to make some of those decisions right when his estranged son and grandson drop back into his life. Newman, in his fortieth year of moviemaking, is well matched by Tandy in one of her last roles. Color, 110 mins.

**Nostalgia.** Oleg Tarkovsky and Erland Josephson, 1983. Directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. Italian with English subtitles. While on a sabbatical to rural Italy with his lovely but affectedly modern assistant, a contemplative Russian poet experiences vivid memories of hidden parts of his past. These flashbacks lead him into a spiritual quest with the village's resident mystic. A deliberately paced and atmospheric effort from Russian formalist Tarkovsky, and the winner of the Grand Prize for Creative Cinema at Cannes. Color, 132 mins.

**Notes on a Scandal. 2006.** Judy Dench and Cate Blanchett star in this much heralded, dark, and witty British drama about an older, very bitter woman and her envy/fascination/spite filled relationship with a beautiful, younger rival. Dench is just as effective as this awful old woman as she is in her other more sympathetic portrayals of today's elders. The ending is both riveting and appalling. Color. 92 mins.

**Nothing in Common.** Tom Hanks, Jackie Gleason, and Eva Marie Saint, 1986. Gleason in his last film plays an abrasive, diabetic father to immature ad man Hanks. Uneven comedy/drama focuses on Hanks' learning to love and care for his ailing father. 119 mins.

**Old Gringo.** 1989. Jane Fonda, Gregory Peck, directed by Luis Puenzo. When schoolteacher Harriet Winslow (Jane Fonda) goes to Mexico to work as a governess, she's caught up in the Mexican revolution and kidnapped by Gen. Tomas Arroyo (Jimmy Smits), with whom she's quickly smitten. But soon after, Harriet meets and falls in love with the sardonic Ambrose "Old Gringo" Bierce (Gregory Peck), a renowned author who's dying and wishes to spend his final days in anonymity. Color, 109 mins.

**The Oldest Living Graduate.** Henry Fonda (in his last stage role), George Grizzard, Cloris Leachman, Penelope Milford, John Lithgow, Harry Dean Stanton, David Ogden Stiers, Timothy Hutton, 1983. Play by Preston Jones. Film of stage presentation in Dallas. A crusty 75-year-old Texas rancher, the oldest living graduate of a Galveston-based military academy and a World War I veteran, has deep feelings and private memories about a parcel of land that clash with his son's commercial vision for the property. Color, 120 mins.

**On Borrowed Time.** Lionel Barrymore, Sir Cedric Hardwicke, Beulah Bondi, and Una Merkel, 1939. Directed by Harold S. Bucquet. This poignant and whimsical film, inspired by an old English folktale, tells the story of an old man able to trick Death into climbing a tree and then holding him at bay. Black and white, 99 mins.

**On Golden Pond.** Katharine Hepburn, Henry Fonda, Jane Fonda, 1981. Directed by Mark Rydell. Academy Awards: Best Actor (Fonda) and Actress (Hepburn). Norman Thayer, a feisty octogenarian obsessed with death and emotionally distant from his daughter, joins his wife to spend their 48th summer on Golden Pond. When his daughter arrives with her fiancée and his son, old wounds are opened, but Thayer finds new purpose in life as a result of his days at the pond in the company of the young boy. Color, 109 mins.

**Opening Night.** Gena Rowlands, John Cassavetes, and Ben Gazzara, 1978. Directed by Cassavetes. Rowlands, a talented but aging actress, is plunged into a crisis of confidence when an adoring young fan is killed on the opening night of a play about aging. Unable to accept the death of her youth, which she equates with the young fan, and unable to play her aging part, the actress hallucinates, attacks the play's aging author Joan Blondell for her lack of hope, and torpedoes the play in rehearsal. Then, in a complex and ultimately rewarding final scene, she saves herself and the play by getting into her own aging and the character she is playing by combining life and art in a brilliant and profound comment on aging successfully accepted. Color, 144 minutes.

**The Other Side of the Street.** Fernanda Montenegro (the heroine of **Central Station**) and Raul Cortes. Directed by Carlos Bernstein. Brazil, 2004. In Portuguese with English subtitles. Sixty-something Montenegro is an unhappy, totally isolated widow living in a Copacabana flat by herself when she thinks she witnesses a murder in a flat across the way. She is already a police informer (her only contact with the world) so she stalks the 60-something man whom she thinks has done the killing. Eventually the two meet and slowly the story changes from thriller to a delicate study of the dangers of isolation and mistrust in old age. The ending is subtle but reassuring. Color, 98 mins.

**Over the Hill.** 1993. Olympia Dukakis is a widow who moves to Australia to be with her daughter and her family. Bored and uncomfortable, she buys a "souped-up" convertible and heads for the outback where instead of an *Elderquest* she embarks on a silly parody of the teenage road movie, taking care of bad guys, meeting an elder dentist with a home made camper and proving presumably that she is not over the hill. Color, 102 mins.

**The Pawnbroker.** 1965. Rod Steiger, Geraldine Fitzgerald, directed by Sidney Lumet. Nominated for the 1965 Academy Awards and winner of Best Actor honors at both the 1964 Berlin International Film Festival and the 1965 BAFTAs, Rod Steiger plays Sol Nazerman, a Jewish pawnbroker and Holocaust survivor embittered and broken by his experience. Sol has become increasingly removed from his friends and the business he runs in Harlem, which has attracted the unwanted attentions of a mobster. Can he turn his life, and his shop, around? Color, 127 mins.

**A Piano for Mrs. Cimino.** 1982. Bette Davis and Keenan Wynn. Declared senile and incompetent, an elderly widow struggles to maintain her dignity. Color, 100 mins.

**The Portrait.** Lauren Bacall, Gregory Peck, and Cecelia Peck, 1993. Directed by Arthur Penn. This made for TV, cable movie is based on the play Painting Churches by Tina Howe, and it reunites Bacall and Peck after 37 years. Peck's real life daughter, Cecelia moves back in with her

parents when she asks them to sit for a portrait, then becomes emotionally involved in their aging: its losses, its conflicts, and its consolations. Color, 89 mins. (Very hard to find.)

**The Postman.** Italian with English subtitles. Masimo Troisi, Phillipe Noiret, Maria Grazia Cucinotta, 1994. Fun, poignant comedy about the unlikely relationship between an aging Pablo Neruda (Noiret) and his tongue-tied Italian postman (Troisi). It's 1952 and Neruda is in exile from his native Chile and eager to make new and loving connections. Color, 115 mins.

**Prospero's Books.** 1991. This Peter Greenaway adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* stars John Gielgud, and is, like all of Greenaway's films, extremely controversial—extraordinarily lush, full of nudity, etc. Nonetheless, it does provide real insight into the play's main theme—Prospero's decision in old age to renounce his magical powers along with his resentment and revenge, to make way for the younger generation, and prepare for death. Color, 126 mins.

**Pushing Hands.** Sihung Lung, Lai Wang, Bo. Z. Wang, Deb Snyder. Chinese and English with good subtitles. 1991. This first feature by Hong Kong filmmaker Ang Lee has been overlooked because of its aging theme, but it is a funny, sad, real account of a 70-year-old Tai Chi master who comes from Peking to live with his son and his white American wife in the New York suburbs. Once there, he finds the loneliness and conflict, the isolation and lack of respect for the elderly worse than the persecutions of China's Cultural Revolution. It is a comedy and all works out, but he isn't kidding. Color, 100 mins.

**The Quiet American.** 2002. Michael Caine. This excellent adaptation of Graham Greene's novel follows the late adventures of an aging and apparently cynical diplomat in Saigon in the early days of the Vietnam War. Is he too old and wise to play the vicious power games of his youth, or is he jealous of those who still can and trying to emulate them one more time? It's a sophisticated political thriller, but it is another searing portrait of the contemporary male in old age. Color, 118 mins.

**Ran.** 1985. Akira Kurosawa's late masterpiece about the futility and horror of war, and the ungratefulness of one's descendents, is loosely based on both **King Lear** and **Macbeth**. Visually stunning, epic in sweep, and genuinely tragic. Color, 160 mins.

**Red.** Irene Jacob, Jean Louis Trintignant, directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski, 1994. The third (and best) of the three films based on the French tricolor—blue, white, and red. A fine intergenerational study. Jacob, a young Swiss model, befriends a retired and withdrawn aging judge, Trintignant. What follows may be the most profound study of the May/December relationship ever filmed. Color, 99 mins.

**Ride the High Country.** Randolph Scott, Joel McCrea, Mariette Hartley, 1962. Directed by Sam Peckinpah. Set in the waning days of the Old West, two aging cowboys are charged with bringing a shipment of gold safely to its destination. Color, 93 mins.

**The Road to Galveston.** Cicely Tyson, Piper Laurie, and Tess Harper, 1996. Made for TV tear-jerker about an aging black woman who manages to hang on to the family's farm by taking care of three Alzheimer's patients—one still in early onset, one both racist and ranting, and the third silent and nearly catatonic. Eventually, she takes them to Galveston—to see the sea—in a treacly upbeat ending. Might be considered relevant to those who wish to know more about this awful disease, but I doubt it. Color, 93 mins.



**Robin and Marian.** Audrey Hepburn, Sean Connery, and Robert Shaw, 1976. Back from the Crusades, an aging Robin courts Marian (now a nun) after 20 years, taking on the Sheriff of Nottingham, too. Delightful wry comedy by Richard Lester, full of sympathetic and very funny bits about the graying couple and their very romantic end. Color, 106 mins.

**Rocket Gibraltar.** Burt Lancaster, Macaulay Culkin, 1988. Directed by Daniel Petrie. A family gathers to celebrate patriarch Lancaster's 77th birthday, unaware that he is seriously ill. His connection with his grandchildren leads him to ask them to carry out his final wish, and not to tell their parents what they're up to. Filmed on Long Island. A little long for the story and needs more editing, but the relationship across generations makes for a good story. Color, 100 mins.

**The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone.** 2003. Helen Mirren, Olivier Martinez, Anne Bancroft and Brian Dennehy, directed by Robert Allan Ackerman. Tennessee Williams's elegiac first novel finds widowed American actress Karen Stone (Helen Mirren) at loose ends after she falls for a handsome -- and much younger -- Italian gigolo (Olivier Martinez). Candid, even sordid version of December/May relationship. Color, 100 mins.

**Sabrina.** Audrey Hepburn, Humphrey Bogart, and William Holden, 1954. Charming, updated fairy tale version of the May/December romance. Hepburn, the chauffeur's daughter with Parisian sophistication, rejects younger playboy Holden for his aging, business tycoon brother played by Bogart. Makes an interesting contrast to more recent, more realistic and complex treatments of the same theme. Not to be confused with the 1995 remake with Harrison Ford, which is not as good. Black and white, 113. mins.

**Saraband.** Swedish, 2003. Directed by Ingmar Bergman (at 84) and starring Liv Ullman who decides to visit her ex-husband Erland Josephson in his summer home thirty years after their divorce. Presumably she is seeking understanding and comfort in old age or perhaps just a return to feeling, but what she encounters is much darker even savage at times. Much less optimistic about the chance for connection in old age than his earlier **Wild Strawberries**. Color, 120 mins.

**Save the Tiger.** 1973. Jack Lemon as an aging, basically honest man who feels he must turn to arson to save his business. Jack Gifford as his partner. The acting is superb in this drama about the aging male, weakness and wrong choices in later life. Color, 100 mins.

**Schultze Gets The Blues.** Germany, 2005. Directed by Michael Schorr. This extraordinarily droll *Elderquest* comedy stars Horst Krause as a fat, retired German salt miner who becomes increasingly bored and disappointed by life in retirement until he hears a few bars of Zydeco on his radio. A fiddler in his local polka band, he drives his friends crazy with his new zydeco beat until they buy him a ticket to a German music festival in East Texas. Once there he steals a boat and heads for the bayous of western Louisiana and the heart of the blues. What he discovers is both funny and amazing. Color, 114 mins.

**Second Hand Lions.** 2003. Michael Caine, Robert Duvall, Directed by Tim McCanlies. In 1960s Texas, timid teenager Walter (Haley Joel Osment) is forced to spend the summer with his rich and eccentric great-uncles (Michael Caine and Robert Duvall) on their farm. Over time, he learns about their mysterious and dangerous pasts. Emmanuelle Vaugier plays an Arabian sultan's daughter with whom Duvall's character fell in love years ago. Good intergenerational tale. Color, 100 mins.

**Shadowlands.** 1993. Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger. Directed by Richard Attenborough.

Elderly and repressed British author C. S. Lewis falls for brash American divorcee Winger in an emotional late-life love story based on a play by William Nicholson. Color, 130 mins.

**Shirley Valentine.** 1989. Pauline Collins. Aging middle class British housewife goes to Greece to rediscover herself and her zest for life and succeeds. Color, 108 mins.

**The Shootist.** 1976. John Wayne in his last and most dignified role as an aging gunslinger who wants to retire and die in peace (he's dying of cancer as Wayne was) but must perform one last violent but heroic act. Color, 100 mins.

**Since Otar Left.** Georgia, 2004. This joint French/Georgian film is set in Tbilisi, the capital of former Soviet Georgia, and directed by Jule Bertucelli. A 70-something grandmother Eka (Esther Gorontin), her 40-something daughter Marina (Nina Khumasondze), and her 20-something granddaughter Ada (Dinara Davkova) live together in poverty and hope aided by checks from son Otar who has emigrated to Paris to find work. When he is killed, daughter and granddaughter keep the truth from Grandmother, fearful that she won't be able to handle it. (In Soviet Georgia lying was a way of life.) But when grandmother finds out and takes the other two to Paris on an *Elderquest*, it becomes clear that she is the toughest of all, and the one best equipped to break the cycle of helplessness and deceit. A magical film brilliantly acted even though daughter Marina is the only professional actress. In French, Russian, and Georgian with excellent subtitles. Color, 103 mins.

**Something's Gotta Give.** 2003. Jack Nicholson, Diane Keaton, Keanu Reeves. Directed by Nancy Meyers. Sixty and still sexy, Harry (Jack Nicholson) is having the time of his life, wining, dining and bedding women half his age. When he meets an auctioneer (Amanda Peet) and agrees to go to the Hamptons with her, he's convinced he's in for a sinfully fun weekend. Plans go awry when her playwright mother, Erica (Diane Keaton), stops in unannounced, and Harry soon discovers there's nothing wrong with—and plenty good about—acting your age. Color, 105 mins.

**Space Cowboys.** Clint Eastwood, Game Garner, Tommy Lee Jones, and Donald Sutherland, 2000. Our four aging heroes, the Daedalus Team, are original right stuff 1950s vintage x-15 test pilots who return as the “ripe stuff” to rescue a runaway former Soviet satellite that turns out to be a kind of doom's day machine. Great fun and never condescending, if a bit outrageous in its insistence that men never change, remaining overgrown boys till the end. Eastwood directs and his other directorial hit, **The Unforgiven**, is a much more honest and realistic picture of the macho man's aging and decline. Color, 130 mins.

**Spring Forward,** Ned Beatty and Liev Schreiber, 2000. Tom Gilroy's marvelous, low-budget independent film chronicles a year's worth of conversations, one each season, between a 20-something ex-con (Schreiber) and the 65-year-old Beatty. Both work for the parks department of a small New England town doing odd, menial tasks, and they have plenty of time to talk of youth and age, life's challenges and disappointments, and most of all the meaning of love and the power each of us possesses to do good. The young man finds himself, the older one eventually retires and finds peace and forgiveness in the process. A rare chance to see two very ordinary, not very articulate men talk about what matters and show their true feelings as well. Color, 125 mins.

**A Straight Story,** 1999. This gem of a movie by David Lynch chronicles a trip made by 73-year-old Alvin Straight from Laurens, Iowa, to Mt. Zion, Wis., in 1994 while riding a lawn mower (his poor eyesight wouldn't allow him to renew his driver's license). He takes this strange journey to mend his relationship with his ill, estranged, 75-year-old brother Lyle, and it is a

superb example of late-life revitalization and transformation. Richard Farnsworth's performance earned him Golden Globe and Oscar nominations for best actor. At 79, he is the oldest to be so honored. Color, 112 mins.

**Strangers in Good Company.** Alice Diabo, Constance Garneau, Winnie Holden, Cissy Meddings, and Mary Meigs, 1992, Canadian. Directed by Cynthia Scott. This delightful and widely hailed film tells the story of a wildly disparate group of older women (a nun, a Mohawk Indian, a lesbian, a stroke survivor, a dowager, and a factory girl) and their female bus driver. Stranded in the Canadian wilderness, they turn life-threatening circumstances into a series of encounters about the nature of aging, its losses and its consolations, its fears and its joys. One character sums it all up while looking up at the night sky, "All's right with the world—we hope." Color, 101 mins.

**Summer Solstice.** Henry Fonda and Myrna Loy, 1981. Fonda and Loy are both excellent as a couple married for fifty years who return to the beach where they first met and review their relationship and their lives together. A lot like **Golden Pond**, but it has its moments. Color, 75 mins.

**Sunday in the Country.** France, 1984. A beautiful and insightful masterpiece by Bertrand Tavernier. Never very successful pre-impressionist painter (Louis Ducreux) is now an aging patriarch who entertains his hopelessly romantic daughter and no-nonsense son and daughter-in-law in his country home outside Paris every Sunday just before World War One. On this Sunday, his whole world is turned upside down, and he embarks on a quest to resurrect his old talent and hope thanks in large measure to his love and respect for his daughter and her continuing quest for something more even when it continues to elude her. All this emerges from the seemingly trivial interactions in a single day's family encounter. Also starring Sabina Azema and Michel Aumont. Color, 104 mins.

**Sunset Boulevard.** Gloria Swanson, William Holden, and Erich Von Stroheim, 1950. Directed by Billy Wilder. Academy Award-winning film of an aging silent movie star and a struggling writer who tries to take advantage of—and is then enthralled by—her madness. Black and white, 110 mins.

**The Sunshine Boys.** Walter Matthau, George Burns, 1975. Directed by Herbert Ross from a Neil Simon screenplay. Best Actor Award: Burns. Two retired vaudeville comedians had audiences rolling in the aisles during their 43 years together, but privately they spent those years in constant mutual irritation. Color, 112 mins.

**The Swimmer.** 1968. Burt Lancaster. Middle-aged Burt Lancaster has made a mess of his suburban life, lost his wife, and alienated just about everybody in town. But he's still in total denial. The film dramatizes his descent into mid-life crisis by having him swim from pool to pool, seeking to preserve his physical prowess, reaffirm his standing with the neighbors, and find his way home, but instead it reveals the truth that he is still unwilling to accept. Bleak and convincing. Based on a short story by John Cheever. Color, 94 mins.

**The Talent Given Us.** USA, 2005. This brilliant, fearless, and astounding docudrama may be the ultimate *Elderquest* film. Director Andrew Wagner wrote the script, put it aside, and then decided to make the film using his own family. His sister is a professional actress, but his mother and father are complete amateurs. The story is simple: the sister returns from LA to visit her parents and their old, summer home on Long Island. En route in the family van, she is literally kidnapped by Mom and Dad and driven to LA in search of the brother who has not responded to recent calls.

The camera and soundman are right in the van with them, the dialogue is mostly improvised, and the family drama is part fiction and terrifyingly and comically real. What a trip! It changes them all, and you have to see it to believe it. (Not yet available for home use.)

**Tatie Danielle.** Tsilla Chelton, Eric Prat, Isabelle Nanty, and Catherine Jacob, 1991. French subtitles. Directed by Etienne Chatiliez. A cruel and cantankerous older woman, described in reviews as "the auntie from Hell," manipulates herself into her nephew's home and proceeds to make life unbearable for everyone, including herself. Leave it to the French to make the first black comedy about aging gone wrong. Color, 114 mins.

**Tell Me a Riddle.** Melvyn Douglas, Lila Kedrova, Brooke Adams, Peter Coyote, 1980. Based on a Tillie Olson story and directed by Lee Grant, this moving tale recounts a dying woman's attempt to reconcile with her family and rediscover her love for her husband of 47 years. Color, 87 mins.

**Things Change.** Don Ameche, Joe Mantegna, 1988. Directed by David Mamet. (Ameche and Mantegna shared the Best Actor Award at the Venice International Film Festival for their roles in this film.) An elderly Italian-American cobbler and a young bumbler trying to make it in the Mafia take the mob for a comic joyride (not always intentionally) in this fast-and-loose farce of mistaken identity and misadventure. Color, 105 mins.

**Tokyo Story.** Chishu Ryu, Chieko Higashiyama, and So Yamamura, 1953. Japanese with English subtitles. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu. Poignant story of elderly couple's journey to Tokyo where they receive little time and less respect from their grown children. Masterful cinematography and sensitive treatment of universal theme. Black and white, 134 mins.

**Toto the Hero.** Michel Bouquet, Mireille Perrier, 1992. A Belgian/French/German film in French, with English subtitles; winner of eight international awards, including the Camera d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Since childhood, Thomas has been consumed by a nagging belief that he was switched at birth with the rich neighbor's son and that the neighbor child has enjoyed the life that Thomas should have led. Now, after over 60 years, Thomas wants revenge. Called a "bittersweet comedy" by the critics, there is a very serious and disturbing side to this film as well. Color, 94 mins.

**Travelling North.** Leo McKern, Julia Blake, 1987. This moving and very real Australian film is about an autumn romance between a most cantankerous old man who tries to be mellow in retirement but can't swing it, especially when he discovers that he is soon to die because of heart trouble. Color, 97 mins.

**The Trip to Bountiful.** Geraldine Page, John Heard, Rebecca DeMornay, 1985. Directed by Peter Masterson from a Horton Foote screenplay. Best Actress Award: Page. An aging woman, living in a small apartment with her son and his wife, returns to Bountiful, her childhood home, even though it no longer exists, and it gives her "enough to last me for the rest of my life." Color, 107 mins.

**The Triplets of Belleville,** France, 2002. All but indescribable French cartoon feature about three aging triplet old maids who live on frogs and help out the beleaguered cyclist hero, his mother and dog, who have been kidnapped and brought to NYC presumably to cycle themselves to death. Hilarious and wondrous, and the old ladies are unstoppable. Color, 91 mins.

**Three Strange Loves.** 1949. Early Ingmar Bergman film about men and women struggling with loneliness, old age, and sterility. A bit disjointed but well acted. In Swedish with subtitles. Black and white, 88 mins.

**Two for the Road.** 1967. Albert Finney and Audrey Hepburn look back on their long and stormy marriage on a road trip in southern France. What went wrong and is their relationship worth saving? Color, 112 mins.

**Tuck Everlasting.** 2002. Alexis Bledel, William Hurt, directed by Jay Russell. Set in the 1800s, this dreamy film follows a reclusive family (Sissy Spacek, William Hurt, Scott Bairstow and Jonathan Jackson) that possesses eternal youth thanks to a magic spring. When a teenage girl named Winnie (Alexis Bledel) gets lost in the woods and meets Jesse Tuck (Jackson) near the spring, she befriends the family and learns why they need to keep their lives a secret from the rest of the world. Eventually, she rejects Tuck and immortality for aging and death—a real breakthrough for a Disney-produced movie. Color, 98 mins.

**Twice in a Lifetime.** 1985. Gene Hackman, Ellen Burstyn, Ann Margret, and Brian Dennehy. Fifty-year-old Hackman leaves family and children for younger barmaid, Margret. Set amongst steel workers in Seattle, this should have been a more convincing portrait of the pain and dislocation of divorce in midlife, and it does have its moments, but it tends to condescend to its blue collar, middle-aged characters. Color, 117 mins.

**Twilight.** Gene Hackman, Paul Newman, and Susan Sarandon, 1997. This Robbie Benton directed film might be entitled aging noir. Everyone's old and on their last legs, the detective, the criminal, and the love interest. Slow but moving, moody, and caring. Color, 96 mins.

**Umberto D.** Carlo Battisti, Maria Pia Casilio, 1952. Italian and subtitled. Directed by Vittorio DeSica. An elderly man, living alone on a small pension, desperately tries to maintain his dignity and hold onto his little dog. Bleak, but a classic. Black and white, 89 mins.

**Uncle Vanya on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.** Based on Chekhov's play, this production began as an acting exercise directed by Andre Gregory with Wallace Shawn in the title role (the same pair was featured in Malle's earlier improvisational film, *My Dinner with Andre*). Working in a crumbling Times Square theatre without scenery, props, or costumes, Gregory and his friends "rehearsed" for five years, dropping in whenever they could. Malle's film is passionately engaging as we "eavesdrop" on masterful performances of Chekhov's famous roles, particularly the aging Vanya and his unending quest for love. Color, 119 mins.

**The Unforgiven.** Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman, and Richard Harris, 1992. Eastwood in one of his best roles as Munny, an aging gunman who realizes too late that he cannot escape his violent past. Lured back into the game, he talks his retired friends into it too, gets them killed, and even though he prevails, is more sickened than pleased by his success. A chilling study of the western code and its power over even those who should be old enough to know better. Color, 131 minutes.

**Venus.** 2006. Peter O'Toole, Leslie Phillips, Jodie Whittaker. Maurice and Ian are successful but aging actors, close friends whose conversation revolves around theatrical shop talk and the infirmities of septuagenarianism. Ian (Phillips) in particular is fearful that death is right around the corner, so he agrees to let his niece's daughter Jessie move in to his flat to care for him. Jessie, a provincial girl in her early twenties, turns out to be a nightmare for Ian, a hard-drinking, rude, and dismissive twerp. But Maurice (O'Toole) sees something else in the girl, a

potential for humanity that eventually blossoms under his gentle guidance. But she also resurrects his legendary lust. What ensues is a breathtakingly honest portrayal of the dirty old man coming to terms with age and moving beyond his lust and nostalgia for conquest to something much more deep and meaningful. O'Toole, nominated for an Academy Award is breathtaking. So is Vanessa Redgrave in a cameo appearance as his ex-wife. Color, 95 mins.

**A Voyage Round My Father.** John Mortimer set piece for Alan Bates, the son, who tries to cope with his opinionated, blind eccentric father, the aging Lawrence Olivier. Color, 85 mins.

**Voyage to the Beginning of the World.** Marcello Mastroianni, 1999. Mastroianni's last film is an only partially successful autobiographical fantasy by 82-year-old Portuguese director Manuel de Oliveira. An old director takes a young actor and actress on a automobile trip back into his past. It fails for him, but the young actor reestablishes some connection with the family his father had deserted. Atmospheric, often moving, but frequently murky exploration of the meaning and value of memory. Italian with hard to read subtitles. Color, 95 mins.

**Waking Ned Devine.** 1998. Ian Bannen, David Kelly, directed by Kirk Jones. How can dead Irishman Ned Devine collect his lottery winnings? Well, longtime cronies Jackie O'Shea (Ian Bannen) and Michael O'Sullivan (David Kelly) have the answer. After discovering that Ned croaked from the shock of hitting the jackpot, Jackie and Michael mastermind a scheme to impersonate the lucky stiff and collect his prize money. Now all they need to do is persuade the rest of Tulaigh Mohr's denizens to go along. Silliness and initiative amongst the elderly. Color, 99 mins.

**Walter and Henry.** 2001. John LaRoquette, Nicholas Braun, and James Coburn. Son must leave his father, a street musician in Brooklyn who has a psychotic break, and move in with the rich and stern grandfather from whom they have been estranged because of the father's "irresponsibility." But a budding relationship between the grandfather and his grandson restores harmony and understanding to the family. Color, 90 mins.

**The Wasp Woman.** 1959 and 1996. Neither the original nor the remake is really recommended, but both are certainly worth noting. A woman desperate to maintain her fading beauty in old age tries an experimental anti-aging cream made from wasp hormones, and sadly but predictably turns into a giant, nasty and brutish wasp. Fortunately both versions are short: Black and white & color. 81 and 84 mins.

**Whales of August.** Bette Davis, Lillian Gish, Vincent Price, Ann Sothorn, 1987. Directed by Lindsay Anderson. Two elderly sisters, one cantankerous and the other patient and forbearing (guess which actress plays which role) have spent 60 summers on a Maine island. With age, they must now decide whether to give up their family home and independence. Color, 91 mins.

**Where's Poppa.** 1970. George Segal and Ruth Gordon. Directed by Carl Reiner. Outrageous black comedy cult classic about Segal's futile and increasingly hilarious attempts to kill his senile grandmother Gordon who is destroying his love life. **Harold and Maude** celebrates Gordon's elderly high jinx, but this time her antics are more than the young can bear. An interesting look at ageism unabashed and played for laughs. Color, 84 mins.

**The Wild Bunch.** 1969. Directed by Sam Peckinpah. Ernest Borgnine, William Holden, Robert Ryan, and Warren Oates. Ultimate western about a group of aging outlaws, aware that life is passing them by (it's 1913) and determined to go out in a hail of bullets. Its lyrical and ecstatic

celebration of their violent end is both disturbing and revelatory, a confirmation of the old male heroic code that death, especially a violent one, is preferable to retirement and a falling off. Color, 145 mins.

**Wild Strawberries.** Victor Sjöström, Bibi Andersson, Max von Sydow, 1957, Swedish with subtitles. Written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. An aging professor, on the road to accept an award, must come to terms with his past as well as his present. Rated by one international survey as among the 20 best films of all times and the prototype for the modern *Elderquest*. Black and white, 90 mins.

**The Winter Guest.** Phyllida Law and Emma Thompson. 1997, Brilliantly quiet, brooding, magical, and eventually celebratory film about all stages of life, and the sometimes fleeting connections between them. In a Scottish seaside town all seems frozen over—even the ocean itself—but four relationships are explored simultaneously: a young widow and her mother, who's trying to break through her daughter's defensive shield; the widow's teenage son, who experiences his first sexual encounter; two older women whose hobby is attending funerals; and a couple of boys playing hooky. Law and Thompson are real-life mother and daughter and the chemistry between them is amazing. Based on a play, co-adapted by Allan Rickman (making his feature directing debut). Color, 112 mins.

**A Woman's Tale.** Sheila Florance, Gosia Dobrowolska, Norman Kaye, 1992 (Australian). Written, produced, and directed by Paul Cox. Martha, an intelligent and vivacious woman, aware that she is probably near the end of her life, accepts the challenge of simply being alive one day at a time. Loved and supported by her nurse, needed by a frail and senile neighbor, and disliked by her landlord, she finds meaning by holding on to those few things—and people—that she loves. One of the few movies whose script actually uses the word "geriatric." Color, 93 mins.

**The World's Fastest Indian.** New Zealand, 2005. True story of New Zealander, Burt Munro (Anthony Hopkins), who broke the world's speed record for motorcycles (on a 1920 Indian) at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1967. He was 68 at the time, and his record of 201mph still stands. A gritty and quite inspirational story about determination and the willingness to take risks and follow dreams even in old age. Color, 127 mins.

**Wrestling Ernest Hemingway.** 1993, Richard Harris, Robert Duvall, and Shirley MacLaine. A wonderfully funny and tender tale of two old men who discover each other and themselves amidst the park benches and coffee shops of seedy, retirement Florida. Harris is an ex-sailor who claims to have wrestled Hemingway and psychologically is still battling with his pernicious influence. Duvall is just the opposite, a prissy, probably virginal ex-barber. Together they humanize each other, become complete men, and begin to age successfully in a series of transforming encounters. Color, 123 mins.

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## 2. Literature about Aging and the Second Half of Life

There have always been stories about aging, but as these lists demonstrate, the longevity revolution has not only added a whole new chapter to the human story, it has spawned a new literary genre, one that is already providing us with new insights into the new old age.

Note: The fiction, drama, and anthology lists are fairly comprehensive; the others are quirky and selective. *Elderquests* are marked with asterisks (\*).

### **Fiction**

Adams, Alice	<b>Second Chances</b>
Amis, Kingsley	<b>The Old Devils</b>
Astley, Thea	<b>Coda</b>
Begley, Louis	<b>About Schmidt and Schmidt Delivered*</b>
Bellow, Saul	<b>The Actual*</b>
Berry, Wendel	<b>The Memory of Old Jack</b>
Brookner, Anita	<b>Making Things Better*</b>
Bryant, Dorothy	<b>Miss Giardino* and The Test</b>
Calisher, Hortense	<b>Age</b>
Canin, Ethan	<b>Carry Me Across the Water*</b>
Cather, Willa	<b>The Professor's House</b>
Cervantes, M. de	<b>Don Quixote*</b>
Chase, Joan	<b>During the Reign of the Queen of Persia</b>
Edgerton, Clyde	<b>Walking Across Egypt</b>
Garcia Marquez, G.	<b>Love in the Time of Cholera*</b>
Guterson, David	<b>East of the Mountains*</b>
Hassler, Jon	<b>Simon's Night, The Green Journey &amp; Dear James</b>
Hebert, Ernest	<b>The Passion of Estelle Jordan</b>
Heller, Joseph	<b>Closing Time</b>
Hijuelos, Oscar	<b>The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Cortez O'Brien</b>
Hodgkins, Jack	<b>Distance*</b>
Holleran, Andrew	<b>The Beauty of Men</b>
Hrabal, Bohumil	<b>Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age</b>
Isler, Alan	<b>The Prince of West End Avenue*</b>
Kleiner, Greg	<b>Where River Turns to Sky*</b>
Lampedusa, G. de	<b>The Leopard</b>
Lurie, Alison	<b>The Last Resort</b>
Lessing, Doris	<b>Love, Again &amp; The Diaries of Jane Somers</b>
McFarland, Denis	<b>The School for the Blind*</b>
Mann, Thomas	<b>The Black Swan &amp; Death in Venice</b>
Marshall, Paule	<b>Praisesong for The Widow &amp; Soul Clap Hands and Sing*</b>
Miller, Sue	<b>The Distinguished Guest</b>
Moore, Brian	<b>The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne</b>



Naylor, Gloria	<b>The Women of Brewster Place &amp; The Men of Brewster Place, Mamaday</b>
Olsen, Tillie	<b>Tell Me a Riddle</b>
Phillips, Kate	<b>White Rabbit</b>
Pouncey, Peter	<b>Rules for Old Men Waiting*</b>
Richler, Mordecai	<b>Barney's Version</b>
Roth, Philip	<b>The Human Stain,* The Professor of Desire &amp; Sabbath's Theatre, Everyman</b>
Russo, Richard	<b>Nobody's Fool</b>
Sackville West, Vita	<b>All Passion Spent*</b>
Sanford, Annette	<b>Eleanor and Abel</b>
Sarton, May	<b>As We are Now &amp; The Reckoning</b>
Scott, Paul	<b>Staying On</b>
Shields, Carol	<b>The Stone Diaries</b>
Spark, Muriel	<b>Memento Mori</b>
Stegner, Wallace	<b>Angle of Repose, Crossing to Safety, The Spectator Bird* &amp; All the Little Live Things</b>
Sterling, Bruce	<b>Holy Fire</b>
Swann, E.L.	<b>Night Gardening</b>
Swift, Graham	<b>Last Orders*</b>
Swift, Jonathan	<b>Gulliver's Travels</b>
Taylor, Peter	<b>A Summons to Memphis</b>
Tilgman, Christopher	<b>Roads of the Heart*</b>
Trevor, William	<b>The Old Boys</b>
Updike, John	<b>Poorhouse Fair</b>
Wallace, Daniel	<b>Ray in Reverse</b>
Williams, Tennessee	<b>The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone</b>
Woolf, Virginia	<b>Mrs. Dalloway*</b>

## **Anthologies**

Unfortunately, all but the Yolen are currently out of print.

Fowler, Margaret & Priscilla McCutcheon, Eds.	<b>Songs of Experience: An Anthology of Literature on Growing Old</b>
Kohn, Martin, Carol Donley, and Delese Wear, Eds.	<b>Literature &amp; Aging: An Anthology</b>
McKee, Patrick and Jon Thiem, Eds	<b>Real Life: Ten Stories of Aging</b>
Sennett, Dorothy, Ed.	<b>Full Measure: Modern Short Stories about Aging</b>
Yolen, Jane, Ed.	<b>Gray Heroes: Elder Tales from Around the</b>

## **World**

### **Drama**

Albee, Edward.  
Coburn, D.L.  
Edson, Margaret  
Euripides  
Fugard, Athol  
Hall, Roger  
Larbey, Bob  
Shakespeare, William  
Shaw, G.B.S.  
Sophocles

**Three Tall Women**  
**The Gin Game**  
**Wit\***  
**The Children of Heracles**  
**The Road to Mecca\***  
**Growing Old Disgracefully**  
**A Month of Sundays**  
**King Lear\* & The Tempest\***  
**Back to Methusaleh\***  
**Oedipus at Colonus\***

### **Poetry**

Files, Meg, ed.

**Lasting: Poems on Aging**

## *B. Some Additional Elderquests in Films and Literature*

### **1. Films**

**Around the Bend.** Directed and written by Jordan Roberts. Michael Caine, Christopher Walken, Josh Lucas, 2004. Four generations of men gather for the first time in years, Caine, the great grandfather dies, but not before he sets the next three generations on the road—to scatter his ashes at selected KFCs in the southwest and to heal a family secret that has been tearing them apart. Wildly original and extremely moving. Walken steals the show as the grandfather whose “transgression” is uncovered and then forgiven in a bittersweet ending that transforms them all. Color, 85. mins.

**Atlantic City.** Burt Lancaster, Susan Sarandon, and Kate Reid. 1980. This wonderfully wry and real bittersweet comedy by Louis Malle chronicles the decline of Lou (Burt Lancaster) and the Atlantic City he once knew. He’s still running the numbers as the casinos go up, protecting his aging and impossible ex-beauty queen Grace (Kate Reid) and lusting after young Sally (Susan Sarandon) whom he watches nightly as she rubs herself with lemons to get rid of the fish smell from her oyster bar casino job—she’s studying to be a dealer. They both get mixed up in a botched drug job, and Burt suddenly finds himself embarked on an *Elderquest*. It helps him to revive his macho image of himself, but only briefly, it liberates Susan, and helps him to return to Grace both literally and figuratively, not exactly reconstructed but certainly better and more honest than he was before. Color, 104 mins.

**The Buena Vista Social Club.** Ruben Gonzales, Ibrahim Ferrer, Ry and Joachim Cooder, Manuel Galban, Barbarito Torres, Cachaito Lopez, Omara Portuondo, et al. 1999. Directed by Wim Wenders and produced by Ry Cooder. In this inspirational documentary, a group of nearly forgotten Cuban *Son* players and singers, most in their sixties and seventies, are brought together by Cooder to resurrect their traditional and very romantic music and with it their lives. The movie chronicles their battered Havana neighborhood and their battered but not broken spirits as they rehearse, perform and eventually take the world by storm. The final sequence in New York as they walk the streets before and after their triumphant Carnegie Hall Concert is a testament to the strength of the human spirit and its capacity for joy, whatever the age or whatever the odds. Color, 97 mins.

**Calendar Girls.** (Great Britain, 2003) Based on a true story about a group of aging women who shocked everyone in their small rural town by posing nude for a calendar to raise money for a cancer center. This charming *Elderquest* comedy stars Helen Mirren and takes its cast on a long and instructive ride to Hollywood and back, changing their attitudes not only toward aging but also about what is important and what is not. Be sure to watch the documentary about the real calendar girls which is available on the DVD. Directed by Nigel Cole. Color, 108 mins.

**Children of Nature.** Gisli Haldorsson, Sigridur Hagalin, Bruno Ganz, 1991. This powerful Icelandic film was nominated for an Academy award in 1992 and tells the story of a 78-year-old who unwillingly enters a nursing home only to meet an equally unhappy 79-year-old woman from his native village far to the north. They steal a jeep, drive, elude capture, and then walk to the village where they grew up in this beautiful, nearly silent and darkly humorous *Elderquest* with a truly magical ending. Color, 85 mins.

**Deconstructing Harry.** Woody Allen and a huge cast of regulars including Billy Crystal as Satan, 1997. This hilarious parody of *Wild Strawberries* has Allen unable to find people to

accompany him on his way to be honored for his life's work so he hires a hooker, kidnaps his son from his ex-wife, and brings along a sick friend who dies on the way. Full of flashbacks with real and fictional characters. Ends with rotten author unable to make sense of life but comforted by Satan for his art. Color, 96 mins.

**Eternity and a Day.** Bruno Ganz and Achilleas Skevis, 1998. Directed by Theo Angelopoulos. Greek with English subtitles. Poetic, complex study of Alexandre, an old poet diagnosed with terminal cancer, who spends his last free day before checking into the hospital searching for meaning and strength by befriending an unnamed Albanian boy. Their adventures together are reminiscent of *Wild Strawberries*, and in the end the young boy's night journey reinvigorates the old man's creative vitality and helps him to prepare for his final journey. Color, 110 mins.

**Ikiru.** Takashi Shimura and Nobuo Kaneko, 1952. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. Won Golden Laurel at the Berlin Film Festival. A lonely civil servant learns that he is about to die and realizes that he has never really lived. Moving from drunken despair to quiet resolve, he embarks on a quest to make his final days meaningful, and we find out that he has only after he has died as the truth emerges at his funeral. Heavy going for a while, but the ending is transcendent. Black and white, 143 mins.

**Kotch.** Walter Matthau directed by Jack Lemon, 1971. Probably Matthau's best portrait of an aging American male resisting his children's attempts to retire him. Determined to live his own life on his own terms, he embarks on an *Elderquest* that takes him into the desert with a pregnant teenager. Funny, a tad sentimental, but full of marvelous details of the aging process. Lemon's directorial debut. Color, 113 mins.

**Last Orders.** Michael Caine, Tom Courtenay, David Hemmings, Bob Hoskins, and Helen Mirren. Based on the novel by Graham Swift. 2001. Jack (Michael Caine) the butcher has just died, and three of his best friends gather in the local pub with his ashes, then set off with his son in a borrowed Mercedes to fling them in the sea at Brighton—Jack's last wish. Along the way they review their lives and loves, remember both Jack and his wife (Mirren), who refuses to go along. They also fight, cry, laugh, and make us love, admire, and pity them all. Color, 109 mins.

**Schultze Gets the Blues.** Germany, 2005. This extraordinarily droll *Elderquest* comedy stars Horst Krause as a fat, retired German salt miner who becomes increasingly bored and disappointed by life in retirement until he hears a few bars of zydeco on his radio. A fiddler in his local polka band, he drives his friends crazy with his new zydeco beat until they buy him a ticket to a German music festival in East Texas. Once there he steals a boat and heads for the bayous of western Louisiana and the heart of the blues. What he discovers is both funny and amazing. Directed by Michael Schorr. Color, 114 mins.

**Since Otar Left.** Georgia, 2004. This joint French/Georgian film is set in Tbilisi, the capital of former Soviet Georgia, and directed by Jule Bertucelli. A 70-something grandmother Eka (Esther Gorontin), her 40-something daughter Marina (Nina Khumasondze), and her 20-something granddaughter Ada (Dinara Davkova) live together in poverty and hope aided by checks from son Otar who has emigrated to Paris to find work. When he is killed, daughter and granddaughter keep the truth from Grandmother, fearful that she won't be able to handle it. (In Soviet Georgia lying was a way of life.) But when grandmother finds out and takes the other two to Paris on an *Elderquest*, it becomes clear that she is the toughest of all, and the one best equipped to break the cycle of helplessness and deceit. A magical film brilliantly acted even though daughter Marina is the only professional actress. In French, Russian, and Georgian with excellent subtitles. Color, 103 mins.

**Sunday in the Country.** France, 1984. A beautiful and insightful masterpiece by Bertrand Tavernier. Never-very-successful pre-impressionist painter (Louis Ducreux) is now an aging patriarch who entertains his hopelessly romantic daughter and no-nonsense son and daughter-in-law in his country home outside Paris every Sunday just before World War One. On this Sunday, his whole world is turned upside down, and he embarks on a quest to resurrect his old talent and hope thanks in large measure to his love and respect for his daughter and her continuing quest for something more even when it continues to elude her. All this emerges from the seemingly trivial interactions in a single day's family encounter. Also starring Sabina Azema and Michel Aumont. Color, 104 mins.

**The Talent Given Us.** USA, 2005. This brilliant, fearless, and astounding docudrama may be the ultimate *Elderquest* film. Director Andrew Wagner wrote the script, put it aside, and then decided to make the film using his own family. His sister is a professional actress, but his mother and father are complete amateurs. The story is simple: the sister returns from LA to visit her parents and their old, summer home on Long Island. En route in the family van, she is literally kidnapped by Mom and Dad and driven to LA in search of the brother who has not responded to recent calls. The camera and soundman are right in the van with them, the dialogue is mostly improvised, and the family drama is part fiction and terrifyingly and comically real. What a trip! It changes them all, and you have to see it to believe it. (Not yet available for home use.)

**The World's Fastest Indian.** New Zealand, 2005. True story of New Zealander, Burt Munro (Anthony Hopkins), who broke the world's speed record for motorcycles (on a 1920 Indian) at the Bonneville Salt Flats in 1967. He was 68 at the time, and his record of 201mph still stands. A gritty and quite inspirational story about determination and the willingness to take risks and follow dreams even in old age. Color, 127 mins.

**Wrestling Ernest Hemingway.** 1993. Richard Harris, Robert Duval, and Shirley MacLaine. A wonderfully funny and tender tale of two old men who discover each other and themselves amidst the park benches and coffee shops of seedy, retirement Florida. Harris is an ex-sailor who claims to have wrestled Hemingway and psychologically is still battling with his pernicious influence. Duval is just the opposite, a prissy, probably virginal ex-barber. Together they humanize each other, become complete men, and begin to age successfully in a series of transforming encounters. Color, 123 mins.

## 2. Novels

Begley, Louis

**About Schmidt** (1996) and **Schmidt Delivered** (2000).

Two highly provocative and entertaining novels. Since the second is a sequel to the first, they should be assigned together, and since they are so totally different from the already assigned Alexander Payne film, they should prompt good discussions – about the differences between movies and novels, about the reasons for their so very different settings, plot lines, characterizations, tone, conflicts, resolutions, etc. In fact, it is hard to imagine a film that is more different from the novel on which it is based.

Brookner, Anita	<b>Making Things Better.</b> An old man and holocaust survivor has spent his whole life searching for “the ultimate satisfaction that has escaped him,” for a way to break out of his caution and withdrawal and commit to risk and real relationship. When he does, it may or may not be too late in this complex novel, the title of which is almost certainly ironic.
Bryant, Dorothy	<b>Miss Giardino.</b> A dedicated but vastly unappreciated public school teacher achieves, not without considerable pain and loss, a new and more honest perspective on the meaning of her past which she then uses to redeem her retirement.
Garcia Marquez, G.	<b>Love in The Time of Cholera</b> (1988). Florentino Ariza’s love for Fermina Daza consumes his entire life, but it doesn’t begin to bear fruit until they are both in their seventies, so it is definitely an <i>Elderquest</i> , perhaps the most romantic, impossible, and eventually triumphant one in all of literature.
Guterson, David	<b>East of The Mountains</b> (1999). Not quite as successful as his more famous <b>Snow Falling on Cedars</b> , but nonetheless an extremely moving account of a 73-year-old physician with terminal cancer who turns his back on the city, his family, and medicine and takes off for the mountains to come to terms with his death, presumably by ending it on his own terms and at his own pace. It doesn’t quite turn out that way, but this is definitely a serious <i>Elderquest</i> , even if it raises more questions than it answers.
Hassler, Jon	<b>Simon’s Night</b> (1979). Simon Shea, a retired English professor, accidentally sets fire to his kitchen, gives up on himself, and checks into an old folks home in northern Minnesota, then sets off on an hilarious, life-affirming quest to get out, get on with his life, his loves, and his dreams. A brilliant, and underappreciated classic about late-life discoveries and transformations.
Hodgkins, Jack	<b>Distance.</b> Middle-aged Sonny accompanies his father on an adventure packed quest for his long lost mother in the Australian outback only to discover that it is his father and the true it can be found right at home in British Columbia in this fine Canadian elderquest novel,
Isler, Alan	<b>The Prince of West End Avenue</b> (1994). Wry, witty, but ultimately very serious story of Otto Korner who, like the other residents of the Emma Lazarus Home for Jewish Elders, is deeply involved in a production of Hamlet that will take him on a quest for the meaning of his life, his role in the Holocaust, and his relationship to his friends and loved ones both past and present.

- McFarland, Dennis      **The School for the Blind.** In this elderquest novel about a brother and a sister coming to terms with their very different lives, author McFarland tells us that he wanted “to show characters in their seventies going through some of the most enormous changes of their lives--my way of trying to debunk the large misconception that very old people are beyond serious personal evolutions.
- Pouncey, Peter      **Rules for Old Men Waiting.** Eightty year old Robert McIver is a retired historian and widower who has come to his summer home on the Cape to die. But first he reimagines and sorts out much of his experience in this very moving elderquest novel.
- Richler, Mordecai      **Barney’s Version** (1997).  
Mordant, vitriolic, even perverse, Barney Panofsky decides to write a memoir in old age to defend himself from accusations that he is a fraud and a murderer. Is he? We only have his version, of course, but in telling his tale he embarks on a quest not for vindication but self knowledge, and that makes this sprawling novel by the Canadian master one of the best of the contemporary *Elderquests*
- Roth, Philip      **The Human Stain** (2000).  
Coleman Silk’s extraordinary, often shocking late-life quest to overcome a lifetime of hostility, disappointment, betrayal, and deceit and finally discover who he is. Not for the squeamish, but none of today’s *Elderquests* take us any further or deeper than this one, demonstrating that the whole meaning and value of a life can keep on changing right up until its end.
- Sackville-West, Vita      **All Passion Spent** (1931).  
Beautifully written saga of 87-year-old Lady Slane who astounds her children (and everyone else) after the death of her famous and dominant husband by acting more like Lear than a helpless old lady and embarking on an *Elderquest* by tube to Hampstead and a whole new life.
- Stegner, Wallace      **The Spectator Bird** (1976).  
By remembering and reliving an earlier mid-life quest, this time with his wife who had been excluded the first time, the aging and seriously depressed Joe Allison, the spectator bird, turns it into an *Elderquest*, becomes a participant in his own life, redeems it, and saves his marriage in the process.
- Swann, E.L.      **Night Gardening.** Upbeat romance between an ailing stroke victim and the landscape architect who restores her physically and spiritually through his love for her and their mutual love of gardening. Set in

Cambridge, Mass and bound to be as appealing to gardeners as it is to the elderly.

Tilgman, Christopher **Roads of the Heart.** A middle-aged son visits his older and presumably bitter father only to be taken along on an *elderquest* through the Deep South and the family's complex emotional past. It's a healing and self-defining journey.

### 3. Plays

Sophocles

#### **Oedipus at Colonus**

The earliest full-length *Elderquest* in Western literature and one whose time (and relevance), thanks to the longevity revolution, may have finally come. After all, it is the play that gives us the final word on the meaning and value of the great king's life, not the more celebrated **Oedipus the King**, which chronicles his earlier, midlife quest, the one that only starts him on his way to self knowledge and eventual redemption.

Shakespeare, William

#### **King Lear**

Perhaps the greatest of Shakespeare's tragedies and the story of an unsuccessful *Elderquest*.

#### **The Tempest**

Perhaps the greatest of Shakespeare's late comedies and the story of a successful *Elderquest*.

Fugard, Athol

#### **The Road to Mecca**

One of the great South African dramatist's most moving dramas. Based on a true story, it tells of the heroic last days of a woman (who like Lady Slane in **All Passion Spent**) refuses to pull down the blinds and fade away after her husband's death. Instead, she embarks on a quest for individual understanding and transcendence by turning to art and self expression. Her sculptures, which fill her house and yard, earn her the condemnation of most of her neighbors including her pastor, but there's one younger woman from out of town who knows better.



### C. Books and Articles on the Course's Films and Novels

#### *In General*

"Aging in Literature: A Selective Annotated Bibliography for Gerontology Instruction" (1999), 13-page booklet published by the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.

Bagnell, P.V.D. & Soper, P. **Perceptions of Aging in Literature: A Cross-Cultural Study.** New York: Greenwood Press. 1989.

Bergman, Ingmar. **Four Screenplays.** New York: Simon and Schuster. 1960.

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Butler, Robert. *Butler Reviews Life Review.* **Aging Today.** Vol. 24 #6. November-December 2003.

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Erikson, Eric H. and Joan M. Erikson. **The Life Cycle Completed *Extended Version.*** New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

Erikson, Erik, Joan Erikson, and Helen Kivnick. **Vital Involvement in Old Age.** New York: Norton and Norton, 1989. 239-292.

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