

# Aging and the Cinema

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Here is a non-comprehensive list of *full-length motion pictures* directly relevant to issues in aging. Most films on this list have a direct link to existing theory and research in adult development and aging. Many of the foreign films are readily available in the U.S. A few documentary films are also included. At the end of the list, I offer annotations (and related developmental issues) for about twenty relevant films I have used in my course, "*Aging in the Cinema*". The list owes thanks to the many people who have offered recommendations, particularly to Charles A. Nicholas for sharing his filmography.

## Selected Listing of Motion Pictures Related to Aging

- Adam's Rib (1992) (Russian)
- Afterlife (1999) (Japan)
- Age-Old Friends (1989)
- Alberta Hunger: My Castle's Rockin' (1992)
- Ali: Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf) (2000) (Germany)
- All About Eve (1950)
- Another Woman (1988)
- Antonia's Line (1995) (Netherlands)
- As Young as You Feel (1951)
- Atlantic City (1980)
- Autumn Spring (2001) (Czech)
- Bagdad Café (1988)
- The Ballad of Narayama (1983) (Japan)
- Best Boy (1979)
- The Big Chill (1983)
- Breezy (1973)
- Cat's Play (1974) (Hungary)
- Cemetery Club (1993)
- Central Station (1998) (Brazil)
- Children of Nature (1991) (Iceland)
- Cinema Paradiso (1988) (France)
- Cocoon (1985)
- Cria! (Cria Cuervos or Raise Ravens) (1975) (Spain)
- Dad (1990)
- Daughters of the Dust (1992)

- Diary of a Mad Old Man (1989)
- Dim Sum: A Little Bit of Heart (1987)
- Do You Remember Love? (1985)
- Dreamchild (1986) (Britain)
- Dreams & Songs of the Noble Old (2000)
- Driving Miss Daisy (1988)
- Eternity and a Day (1998) (Greece)
- The First Wives Club (1996)
- A Family Upside Down (1978)
- The Field (1990)
- Fried Green Tomatoes (1991)
- A Gathering of Old Men (1987)
- Gertrud (1965) (Denmark)
- The Gin Game (1984)
- Going in Style (1979)
- Golden Years (1991)
- The Grandfather (1999) (Spain)
- The Grey Fox (1983)
- Growing Old in Russia (2001) (Russia)
- Grumpier Old Men (1995)
- Grumpy Old Men (1993)
- Hanging Up (2000)
- Harold and Maude (1971)
- Harry and Tonto (1974)
- The Hours (2002)
- How to Make an American Quilt (1995)
- Icedtime For Old Guys (1999)
- Ikuru (Doomed or To Live or Living) (1952) (Japan)
- I'm Not Rappaport (1996)
- I Never Sang for My Father (1970)
- Innocence (2001) (Australian)
- Iris (2001)
- King Lear (Several versions)
- Kotch (1971)
- Ladies in Lavender (2004) (UK)
- La Pasion Turca (1994) (Spain)
- The Last Good Time (1995)
- The Last Laugh (1924) (Germany)
- Lies My Father Told Me (1975)
- Local Hero (1983)
- Lost for Words (1999)
- Love (1971) (Hungarian)
- Love Among the Ruins (1975)
- Madadayo (1995) (Japan)
- Madame Rosa (1977) (France)
- Madame Sousatska (1988)
- Mama Turns 100 (1978) (Spain)
- Man of Flowers (1984) (Australia)
- Martha and Ethel (1994)
- Middle Age Crazy (1980)
- Monkey Business (1953 version)
- Mr. and Mrs. Bridge (1991)
- Mrs. Brown (1997) (England)
- Mrs. Dalloway (1997)
- Nobody's Fool (1994)
- Nostalghia (1983) (Italy)
- The Old Explorers (1993)
- Old Gringo (1989)
- The Old Lady Who Walked in the Sea (1995) (France)
- Old Man and the Sea (1958)
- The Oldest Living Graduate (1983)
- On Borrowed Time (1939)
- On Golden Pond (1981)
- One True Thing (1998)
- Opening Night (1978)
- Over the Hill (1992)
- Pauline and Paulette (2003) (Netherlands)
- The Pawnbroker (1965)
- The Portrait (1993)
- The Pumpkin Eaters (1964)
- These Old Broads (2001)
- Pushing Hands (1991) (Chinese)
- Queen of the Stardust Ballroom (1975)
- Ran (1985)
- Red (1994)
- Right of Way (1983)
- Robin and Marion (1976)
- Rocket Gibraltar (1988)
- A Rumor of Angels (2000)
- Save the Tiger (1973)
- Shadowlands (1994)
- The Shameless Old Lady (1965-France) (2002)
- Shirley Valentine (1989)

- Since Otar Left (2000)  
(France/Belgium)
- Sol de Otono (Autumn Sun) (1986)  
(Argentina)
- Spring Forward (1999)
- Steel Magnolias (1989)
- The Shootist (1976)
- The Stone Boy (1985)
- The Story Lady (1991)
- The Straight Story (1999)
- Strangers in Good Company (1991)  
(Canada)
- Sundays and Cybele (1962)
- The Sunshine Boys (1975)
- Sunset Boulevard (1950)
- The Swimmer (1968)
- Tatie Danielle (1990) (France)
- Tell Me a Riddle (1980)
- Terms of Endearment (1983)
- That's Life! (1986)
- To Dance with the White Dog (1993)
- Tokyo Story (1953) (Japan)
- Toto the Hero (1992)  
(Belgium/France/Germany)
- Tough Guys (1986)
- Traveling North (1987) (Australia)
- The Trip to Bountiful (1985)
- Tuesdays with Morrie (1999)
- Twice in a Lifetime (1989)
- Twilight Zone: The Movie ("Kick  
the Can" Segment) (1983)
- Umberto D (1952) (Italy)
- Unforgiven (1992)
- Unhook the Stars (1997)
- Used People (1992)
- A Very Old Man with Enormous  
Wings (1988) (Cuba)
- Voice of the Old Ones (1998)
- Voyage to the Beginning of the  
World (1998)
- The Wash (1988) (Japan)
- The Whales of August (1987)
- Where the Money Is (2000)
- Where's Poppa? (1970)
- The Whisperers (Britain)
- Wild Strawberries (1957) (Sweden)
- The Winter Guest (1997)
- The Witches (1990)
- A Woman's Tale (1992) (Australia)
- A Woman Under the Influence  
(1974)
- Wrestling Ernest Hemingway (1993)
- Zorba the Greek (1964)
- 28 Up (1984)
- 35 Up (1991)
- 42 Up (1999)

## Highly Recommended Films

### Age-Old Friends (1989)

Two elderly men (Hume Cronyn and Vincent Gardenia), sustained by their friendship, cope with their changing lives and identities in a long-term care facility. This light story examines the day-to-day existence of John Cooper (Cronyn) and his friend in an upper-crust retirement home. His wit and sarcasm have managed to separate him from his daughter and her family, but ultimately serves him well in coping with the age-related changes, including his friend Aylott's Alzheimer's disease. Nice "turn-around" ending. Relevant issues: Long-term care, family relations, social support in the later years.

### The Ballad of Narayama (1983) (Japan)

Winner of the Grand Prize at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival, *The Ballad of Narayama* is based on one of the most astonishing of all Japanese legends. A century ago in a remote mountain village, local custom dictated that elders, upon reaching 70 years of age, were to be taken to Mount Narayama to die. This is a brilliant film from director Shohei Imamura that delivers a vigorous and beautiful affirmation of family, life, and death. Japanese with English subtitles. Relevant issues: Cross-cultural aging and family relations; age status; longevity; euthanasia.

## **Cocoon (1985)**

A Ron Howard-directed film about a group of elderly residents (including Wilford Brimley, Hume Cronyn, Jessica Tandy, Don Ameche) of a retirement community who discover that aliens are nurturing a rejuvenating life force in the water of a nearby swimming pool. Of most relevance are scenes depicting the agonies of these older people as they decide whether or not to accept an invitation from the alien host to travel to a new world, where "we'll never be sick, we'll never get any older, and we'll never die." Ameche won an Oscar for his role in this film. Relevant issues: Longevity, maximum life-extension.

## **The Gin Game (1984)**

A filmed version of the Broadway stage play, this film deals with the relationship that develops between an elderly man (Hume Cronyn) and woman (Jessica Tandy) in a personal care home as they meet on several occasions to play gin. The drama starts lightly and comedically as we watch the old man's reaction to consistently losing to his playing partner. The meaning of the game becomes apparent and the mood shifts to deadly serious as begin to see what losing (and never winning) means to Cronyn's character at this time of his life in this setting. This version is far superior to a recent TV remake starring Dick Van Dyke and Mary Tyler Moore. Relevant issues: Autonomy, control, self-esteem, mental health.

## **I Never Sang for My Father (1970)**

This excellent film portrays the dynamics and complexities of intergenerational relations in a powerful and gripping fashion, focusing primarily on the relationship between a possessive and dominating father (Melvin Douglas) and his middle-aged son (Gene Hackman), who yearns for his father's love while trying to establish his own independence. The last 45 minutes, dealing with the full array of emotions surrounding issues of parent caring and institutionalization, is easily adapted to shorter classroom presentation. The film is especially relevant for illustrating the point that relationships often survive the deaths of loved ones as survivors continue to mull over and reconstruct the meanings they offer. Relevant issues: Parent caring, family relations, intergenerational relations.

## **Innocence (2001) (Australia)**

This is clearly one of the best films made dealing with the many meanings of love and intimacy in the later years. Directed by Paul Cox (“A Woman’s Tale”), it centers on re-ignited love between two people (played by Julia Blake and Charles Tingwell) who were lovers in Belgium as teenagers and who discover each other in their late 60’s in Adelaide, Australia. Claire (Blake’s character) is in a staid marriage that “will see her out.” Andreas (Tingwell’s character) is a widower. As one critic noted, the version of love depicted here is not the “sentimental version of love for the twilight years,” but rather “passionate, demanding, forgiving, accepting love” (Ebert, 2003). Their passion virtually explodes amidst the mundane routine and habituation marking their lives and the expectations of their families and friends who depend upon them to remain predictable. The shock waves force major readjustments. The film deals directly, honestly, and sensitively with issues of modesty, disappointment, betrayal, fear, and desire. Its impact is aided by the fact that both Blake and Tingwell are actors with low recognition value in North America, enhancing the real-world effect of the portrayals. Some critics have used the word “transcendent” to summarize the power of the film. Relevant issues: Love, intimacy, and sexuality in the later years, marital quality in later life, intergenerational relations.

## **Iris (2001)**

Based on the novels of John Bayley (Academy Award performance by Jim Broadbent), the life of the extraordinary English author Iris Murdoch (Kate Winslet and Judi Dench) is the focus of this excellent movie. The film is at its best in depicting the love and incongruities reflected in the odd pairing of Murdoch and Bailey as they age together. The toll taken by Alzheimer’s disease upon Murdoch’s brilliant mind, her devoted husband, and their loving relationship is painful to watch but honestly portrayed. Relevant issues: Love and intimacy in life-span context, Alzheimer’s disease.

## **Martha and Ethel (1994)**

A unique narrative documentary. The film consists of interviews with two elderly nannies who reflect on a lifetime of surrogate family and parenting experiences serving two upper-class families. The women are extremely different. Ethel is a fun-loving Southerner, gentle and unconditionally-loving. Martha is a rather stern, sometimes intimidating German immigrant. Their long-tenure as “surrogate mothers” raises interesting questions regarding the meaning of family and parenthood. Relevant issues: Aging in unique family context, life review, socio-historical and cohort influences on aging experience.

## **Shirley Valentine (1989)**

A funny and, at times, mellow film about an English housewife who decides to escape her humdrum existence and find a happier existence in the Greek islands. The film is useful in depicting the so-called mid-life crisis from a woman's perspective and offers a nice balance of male reactions as Shirley struggles to find herself. Relevant issues: Mid-life crisis, gender differences, gender relations.

## **Strangers in Good Company (1991) (Canada)**

Cynthia Scott directed this story of eight radically different women (e.g., a Mohawk, a nun, a talented blues singer, a literary lesbian, iconoclastic free-thinker) who are stranded in the Quebec countryside when their bus breaks down. This metaphoric film does a beautiful job distinguishing among their diverse personalities as they utilize their differences to meet their common needs as aging women. All of the women play themselves and much of the interaction is spontaneous. Slow paced but fulfilling. A hidden contrast exists in the question of how a group might have handled a similar situation. Relevant issues: Gender differences, older women, social support, diversity and aging.

## **The Straight Story (1999)**

Based on a true account, this David Lynch film tells the deceptively simple story of 73 year-old Alvin Straight, a fiercely independent resident of Ida Grove, Iowa, who drove his 1966 John Deere lawnmower 240 miles to Wisconsin to visit his estranged and ailing brother. His journey – filmed along the actual route -- is related in a series of encounters, marked by warmth, humor, fear, courage, and caring. The late Richard Farnsworth's poignant and spare portrayal of Straight is remarkable, earning him an Oscar nomination for best actor. Sissy Spacek has a small, touching role as his daughter. Relevant issues: Sibling relations, social support, wisdom, rural aging.

## **The Stone Boy (1985)**

A touching film of a very young farm boy who becomes mute after he is involved in the accidental shooting death of his older brother. Offering no simple solutions, the story focuses on the attempt of the boy and his family to come to grips with the tragedy. An important component of the film is the healing bond shared by the boy and his grandfather (Wilford Brimley). Relevant issues: Family relations, grandparenting, affectional bonds.

## **The Swimmer (1968)**

An intriguing and unusual story about a middle-aged man (Burt Lancaster) swimming his way home via his neighbors' swimming pools; his character and his past are increasingly revealed at each station and in the final confrontation with reality which occurs when he reaches home. This under-rated film is extremely compelling, forcing the viewer to construct the identity and problems of the character gradually emerging from his experiences at each pool. Lancaster is terrific. Based on a John Cheever short story. Relevant issues: Midlife crisis, phases of adult development, coping, social support.

## **Tatie Danielle (1990) (France)**

An old Moroccan parable (thanks owed to David Gutmann) holds that at birth, every female infant is surrounded by a hundred angels and every male infant by a hundred devils. With each passing year, a devil is exchanged for an angel and an angel by a devil. Thus, in later life, the older woman ends up with a mythical countenance that ranges from mean to evil. This French comedy introduces an old woman with her full share of devils. Tatie Danielle (Tsilla Chelton) is nasty to her servant, her family (she manages to manipulate a position for herself in the household of her nephew and his wife) and even her pet. While very funny, Tatie's unrelenting manipulative and deceitful behavior has a dark edge that wears on the viewer. While some think the film is intended to draw contrasts between the old and the new France, most viewers will focus primarily on the more literal depiction of this unpleasant old woman who will stop at nothing to vent her anger on everyone near her. Students of gerontology will find much to discuss regarding gender differences and aging and confront the reality that like those of any age, there are some older people that are just not very nice. The film offers layered questions for students of gerontology, e.g., "*should* I be laughing at this film?", "am I laughing because I'm buying into a negative stereotype?" Though extreme, the portrayal offers a nice entrée to discussions of family care-giving scenarios and unequal power differentials. French with English subtitles. Relevant issues: personality in later life, gender and aging, family caregiving, social exchange model of aging, humor and aging.

## **That's Life (1986)**

A feel-good film that deals with transitions to adulthood and the youth of old age. Jack Lemmon plays a wealthy, neurotic architect who is about to turn 60. Preoccupied with his own concerns about growing older, he is oblivious to the concerns of his wife (Julie Andrews) as she awaits results from hospital tests. In the midst of these concerns, their children return home to surround them with new challenges in their own lives. Blake Edwards's (Andrews' husband) directed and shot this film in their Malibu home and the cast includes members of the Edwards-Andrews family. This is an introspective, funny film with a nice balance; it isn't excessively heavy and doesn't trivialize the concerns of the main characters. Relevant issues: Stereotypes of aging, adult transitions, coping with life crises.

## **The Trip to Bountiful (1985)**

My personal favorite. A sensitive and powerful portrayal of an old woman's desire to visit the home of her childhood in the small rural town of Bountiful. The story basically unfolds in three acts, depicting her unhappy life in the household of her son and daughter-in-law, her successful "escape", and the restorative confrontation of past and present when she arrives at her homeplace in Bountiful. Geraldine Paige received an Oscar for her portrayal. Relevant issues: Place meaning, place attachment, intergenerational relations, parent caring, rural aging.

(Note: The TV film version of the Tony Award-nominated Broadway revival of Horton Foote's *The Trip to Bountiful*, starring Tony and Emmy winner Cicely Tyson, was aired on Lifetime TV February 22, 2014 as part of the network's Black History Month programming).

## **A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings (1988) (Cuba)**

An old man with enormous wings washes to shore following a Columbian cyclone. He is housed in a chicken coup by his discoverers, who invite curious on-lookers from around the world to view him for a price. His appearance and his silence spark Rorschach-like speculation from local residents about his purpose. His final message, in the words of one reviewer, "turns out to be a very mixed," indeed. Very nice vehicle for examining age-related archetypal projections. Based on the original story by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, who wrote the screenplay. Spanish with English subtitles. Relevant issues: Psychodynamic meaning of aging, aging and death, stereotypes of aging, cross-cultural interpretations of aging.

## **Wild Strawberries (1957) (Sweden)**

This classic Ingmar Bergman film focuses on the reminiscences and dreams of an elderly man as he travels to Lund to receive a prestigious award for his lifetime service as a physician. The journey brings self-revelations that are disturbing as well as pleasant, forcing a realization that, in this instance, there is integrity "in this chain of unexpected, entangled events." In *Vital Involvement in Old Age* (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986), Erik Erikson writes extensively of the illustrative power of this film for understanding the "stage-bound involvements of human beings of different ages" (p. 291), particularly the powerful function of the life review process. Swedish with English subtitles. Relevant issues: Eriksonian life stages, reminiscence, life review, mental health and aging.

## **A Woman's Tale (1992) (Australia)**

A superior and beautiful film about an old woman (played by Sheila Florence) who exemplifies integrity and hope in the face of death. Rich and honest in depiction of her relations with family and friends. Florence, who was herself dying of cancer when she made this film, won the Australian Academy Award for her portrayal. Possibly the bravest scene ever filmed by an actor is contained in this movie. This is a must-see, wonderful movie, regardless of one's specific interests. Relevant issues: Successful aging, attitudes toward aging, primary and secondary aging, spirituality and aging, gender differences, mental health and aging.

## **42 UP (1999)**

Every 7 years since 1964, Director Michael Apted (“Gorillas in the Mist”, “The World is Not Enough”) has documented the lives of 14 people beginning in their childhood (age 7) up to this latest installment (age 42). Longitudinal research is often criticized for failing to provide a flesh-and-blood appreciation of lives-in-context. This cinematic longitudinal work partially satisfies this complaint, though it is not located within an organized or helpful developmental framework. Developmentalists and gerontologists will have a ball exploring the “psychological archeology” afforded by the content. The individuals come from varying social backgrounds and the film illustrates issues of rigid class systems on the choices available to those that inhabit them. This is not a film with an established plot and outcome. It is, rather, an on-going saga and the viewer carries away attachments and concerns about the future of real individuals. The entire series of films could easily provide the stimulus content for a week-long workshop on life-span issues in social-personality psychology. Relevant issues: Contextual influences on adult development, personality, continuity vs. stability, socialization to adulthood, emotional development and aging.